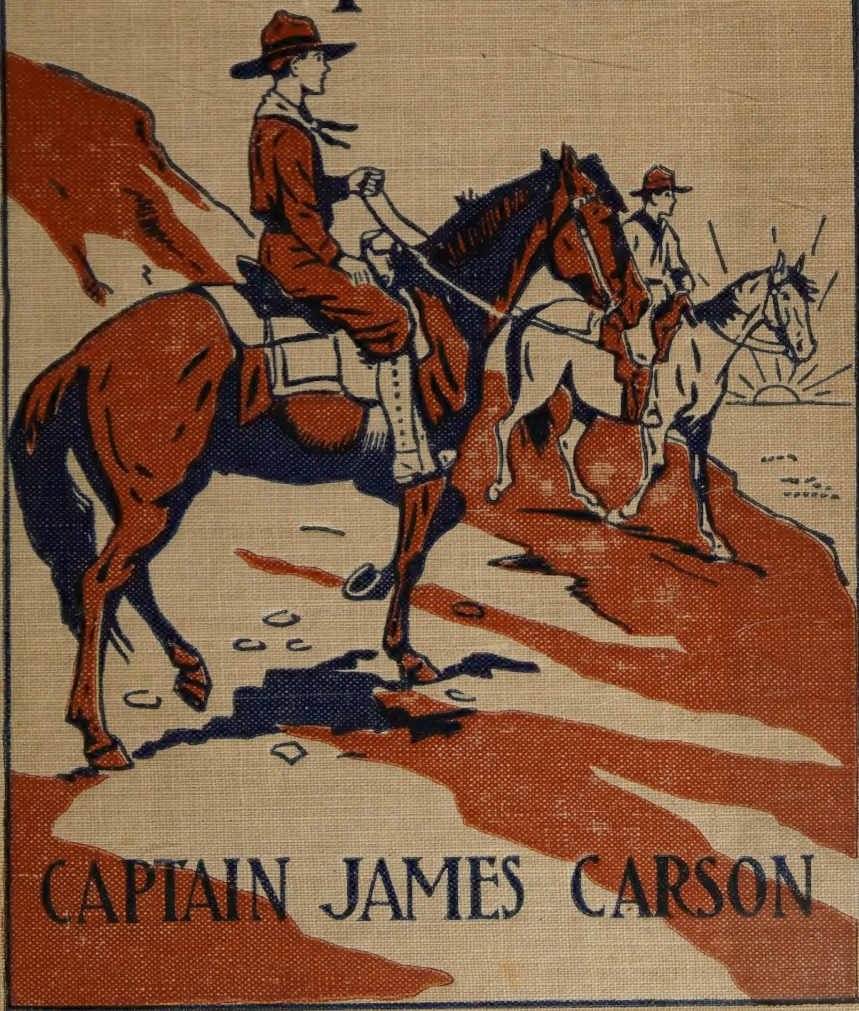
THE SADDLE BOYS ON THE PLAINS



CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

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THE TWO STOOD WATCHING WITH WIDE EYES.

The Saddle Boys on the Plains

Or

After a Treasure of Gold

BY

CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

AUTHOR OF "THE SADDLE BOYS OF THE ROCKIES," "THE SADDLE BOYS IN THE GRAND CANYON," "THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH," ETC.

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BOOKS FOR BOYS

BY CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

THE SADDLE BOYS SERIES

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THE SADDLE BOYS OF THE ROCKIES
Or, Lost On Thunder Mountain

THE SADDLE BOYS IN THE GRAND CANYON
Or, The Hermit of the Cave

THE SADDLE BOYS ON THE PLAINS
Or, After a Treasure of Gold

THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH
Or, In At The Grand Round-Up

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THE SADDLE BOYS ON THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

STARTING FOR CHERRY BLOSSOM MINE

"So-long, boys! We'll look for you back in ten days or two weeks, Frank!"

"Sure, dad; but don't worry if we fail to show up by then. Something might happen to detain us at the mine, you know!"

"Send word, if you can, son. I suppose I ought to go with you myself; but that game leg still troubles me on a long ride. Besides, you and Bob have done so well lately, that I think it would be safe to trust anything in your hands."

"We're going to do the best we can to get the tangle ironed out at the mine, whatever it proves to be; and have matters running smooth again. Good-by, Bart Heminway! All kinds of good luck with you on the range while we're away. So-long boys! Wish the whole bunch of you could gallop with us! Ready, Bob? Then we're off!"

A series of parting salutes, such as only wide-awake cowboys know how to give, followed Frank and his chum as they galloped away from the Circle Ranch cattle corral.

Frank's father, the owner of the place, sat stride his big roan, and surrounded by his dozen tried and true "punchers" watched his boy Frank, accompanied by his comrade, Bob Archer, from Kentucky, as they topped a slight rise of the prairie about half a mile away.

"One last shout, and then we lose sight of the old ranch house!" said Frank.

They turned in the saddle, and waved their hats three times, accompanying each movement with a clear call that brought an answering whoop from the little cluster of horsemen.

Then the word was given, and the eager, mettlesome horses sprang down the easy descent. The distant white-washed buildings, that constituted the heart of the famous Circle Ranch in Arizona, disappeared from sight. Before the two boys lay the great level plains, with the mountains in the distance.

Frank had been brought up amid such surroundings, and was fairly well versed in such things as went with life on a big cattle ranch. He was never so happy as when mounted on his sturdy and swift pony, "Buckskin," and galloping over the country, either pursuing some of the duties of a cow puncher, or hunting such game as might be found within a radius of twenty miles.

Frank was a athletic fellow, as might be expected of one who spent so much time on horse-

back. His clear blue eyes gleamed fearlessly, and he had proved this trait of his character on numerous occasions.

Bob Archer, his chum, had until recently lived in Kentucky, where he attended a military academy at Frankfort. His father having entered into partnership with Colonel Haywood in several mining ventures, the old home had been left behind for a new life in Arizona.

These two lads had early taken a great fancy to one another. Of course when Bob first came to the cattle country he was a real "tenderfoot;" but experience was fast taking that title away. Indeed, the boys of Circle Ranch declared that it was seldom a "greenhorn" picked up so quickly a knowledge of the thousand-and-one things essential to the genuine cowboy.

He had brought a black horse from his Kentucky home; and this same Domino had often proved that he could run a mile faster than the smaller Buckskin; but when it came to an all-day gallop, the animal Frank bestrode was apt to show up better as a "stayer."

Not a great while before this, the boys had passed through a series of stirring adventures while investigating a mystery that had awed the Indians for perhaps fully a century. A mountain within a day's ride of the ranch often gave vent to strange sounds that were likened to the

growl of heavy thunder. What it turned out to be, and how the boys solved the puzzle, is contained in the first volume of this series, called "The Saddle Boys in the Rockies; or, Lost On Thunder Mountain."

It was shortly after their return to the ranch that a remarkable thing happened when a message that had been found in a sealed bottle floating in the current of the Lower Colorado River was brought to Colonel Haywood, at a time when he happened to be laid up with a broken leg.

If you think you would like to learn how Frank and Bob took the place of the ranchman, going on horseback to the world-famous Grand Canyon of the Colorado in answer to the call that had reached them, together with what remarkable things happened to them while there, read the second volume in this series, entitled, "The Saddle Boys in the Grand Canyon; or, The Hermit of Echo Cave."

And now the lads were once again starting out on a long gallop that would take them far to the south, into the mining country within a day's ride of the Mexican border. Here was located the most valuable of all the gold-producing properties controlled by Colonel Haywood and Mr. Archer, known as the Cherry Blossom Mine.

Word had been brought to the colonel that there seemed to be trouble brewing at the mine.

The message had given no particulars, nor was it signed with any name. It simply stated that if he were wise, and wished to nip trouble in the bud, he would better take a horse and run down to investigate, before matters reached a crisis.

But as Mr. Archer was East, looking after the marketing of certain stock in Wall Street, and Colonel Haywood's broken leg had hardly healed enough for him to attempt a ride of several days, the ranchman found himself once more compelled to throw the burden on the shoulders of his only son Frank, and the latter's chum, Bob Archer.

Armed with all manner of instructions, and legal documents to prove their authority as the representatives of the parties holding a controlling interest in the wonderfully productive Cherry Blossom, the two chums were now heading into the hazy South. What lay beyond no one could even guess; but both seemed to "feel in their bones," as Bob expressed it, that new and surprising adventures were in store for them among the plains and mountains of Southern Arizona.

And so they started out that fine morning, with high anticipations. In the bracing air the two horses vied with each other in covering the ground; though Frank constantly advised his comrade to hold Domino in.

"Ont here, you see, Bob," he would remark,

"Where the horses are used to making a ten-hour run; and then going at it again after a little rest, when a stampede happens along, we learn the value of holding a willing pony in early in the day. It means better work later in the run. He gradually gets down to business; just as you've seen engines do in making a slow start."

"Sure, I understand all that, Frank, because you've told me lots of times; but then Domino doesn't seem to get on to it," Bob replied, with a laugh. "He pulls as if he belonged to a fire engine, and had heard the alarm. Hold up there, you Blue-Grass exile; before the day is done you'll have all the exercise you want, I reckon."

"There's a fine bunch of our cattle grazing down by the stream yonder," remarked Frank, pointing with the quirt which was fastened to his left wrist, cowboy fashion.

"And this is about as far as they're allowed to roam, isn't it?" asked Bob.

"Yes, some of the boys have been keeping watch on this lot all night," Frank replied. "See, there's a fellow now, waving his hat, and whooping at us. That must be Chesty Lane. Say, you can just depend on it he's feeling some bad that he can't ride with us. Chesty is always hungry for something to happen. When things run too smooth he just has to get away, and look for excitement somehow."

"It was down through that rocky coulie that last pack of wolves crept, when they played such hob with the calves, wasn't it?" Bob inquired, after they had answered the wild cheers of the "puncher" who was serving as guardian to the herd.

"Yep!" said Frank. "But the chase was swift, and not a single one of the pack ever got away. I knocked over a hairy thief myself, and that's the skin on the floor of my room. It's nearly as big as the pelt you got, when we tracked old Sallie and her whelps to their den, and you shot her."

"Wolves are getting scarce around here, Frank, what with the ranchmen offering bounties for every scalp, besides what the state pays!"

"Oh! there are always a few coming down from the mountains," replied the other. "Up there they have breeding places where no man can ever find 'em. But we have no cause to complain about wolves nowadays. It's the rustlers that bother us most."

"That crowd under the Mexican, Pedro Mendoza, you mean," Bob went on.

"Yes, they have some secret hiding place that as yet has never been discovered. Some believe they come all the way up from Mexico, but my dad never would take to that idea. And he declares that the next time any of the Circle cattle

are driven off, he's going to camp on the trail of the thieves, and keep on following them if it takes him down to Chihuahua."

Frank himself looked quite grim as he said this. Evidently he was of the same mind as his father, the rancher.

When two hours had passed, and they had placed a good many miles between themselves and the ranch house that lay far to the north, Frank drew up his horse.

"Better let 'em take a breathing spell," he remarked. "And you notice, now, that your black doesn't seem quite so eager to rush things."

"I knew he would get over it," laughed Bob, as he patted the shiny flank of his mount. "But what lies away yonder toward the Southwest?"

"That's the Arrowhead Ranch buildings, with a grove of timber about them," Frank replied. "You know they've got a fine stream of water there, that comes down from the mountains. Father tried to buy that ranch, but some one else had the option. I'm afraid it's going to drop into the hands of the Syndicate that is gobbling up all the good properties around here."

"You mean the crowd of Eastern capitalists, headed by the father of Peg Grant, the fellow we had the trouble with on Thunder Mountain?" Bob went on.

"Yes, the same bunch," Frank continued.

"They have it in for dad, I'm afraid, just because he chooses to run his own business in his own way, and refuses to throw in with the Syndicate."

"You won't go over to the Arrowhead, then?" Bob asked.

"Not to-day. I've been there lots of time, though. One of our boys got in a peck of trouble with some of their punchers a short time ago; and just now there's bad blood between us. Come on, and we'll hit out for the hills some miles off."

Frank gave Buckskin the signal with his heels, and away the two horses flew over the level.

On reaching the hilly country Frank struck into a trail leading through a district that was rapidly growing wilder as they advanced; though after a while they might again strike out on the open country.

There were times when the trail itself was so narrow that Bob fell in behind, and they moved along in single file, the horses climbing the rise gallantly.

Frank had his eyes ahead. He fancied that he had detected some slight movement at a turn about fifty yards beyond the spot they had now reached.

"Hold up a minute, Bob!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand in the manner understood by every rider of the plains.

Just as he spoke he heard a strange "swish-

ing" sound close by. Involuntarily Frank ducked his head. Brought up amid such surroundings, his ear was in tune with all things connected with range life; and in this hissing sound he knew that he had caught the whirl of a lariat through the air. Just as he turned in his saddle, he heard from his chum a half-muffled cry that thrilled him.

CHAPTER II

THE SUDDEN ALARM

WHEN he turned so hastily, the astonished Frank was just in time to see his chum topple from his saddle, and fall heavily to the ground.

Domino, the black Kentucky horse, began plunging wildly; but, fortunately, Bob's feet were free from the stirrups, so there was no danger of his being dragged, should the mettlesome horse bolt.

A series of yells broke forth from the rocks and bushes just above the road. It was from that point that the rope had been thrown which had caught Bob so neatly, and unseated him.

Filled with the greatest alarm, and half fancying that they had been waylaid by some Indians off their reservation, Frank was trying to get hold of his rifle, which he carried fastened to his back.

Buckskin, too, was prancing as though excited; and it was no easy task to keep half a grip on the bridle, and at the same time manage the gun.

Frank saw that Bob had scrambled to his knees, and was holding on to the loop of the lariat which he had snatched from around his shoulders.

There had been some resistance at first; but apparently those behind the bushes feared what was likely to happen once Frank succeeded in getting his rifle free, for abandoning the rope they fled with a new series of howls.

"Why don't you shoot, Frank?" cried Bob, considerably ruffled by his hard fall, and unable to understand what it all meant.

"I've got half a mind to; the cowardly curs, to play such a mean trick on us, and then vamoose like snakes!" gritted Frank, raising his gun once or twice, and aiming in the direction where the shouts and wild laughter still continued, though gradually growing fainter.

He could see several figures jumping over obstacles, and trying to take advantage of every little bit of cover that cropped up. And they were neither Navajo Indians, as he had at first suspected, nor the rustlers who were in the mind of his chum.

"A trick, was it?" ejaculated Bob, feeling ruefully of his knees, where he had come in contact with the earth on falling. "Then they didn't mean to steal our horses, Frank?"

"Not quite so bad as that," returned the other; "but I wouldn't put it past Peg Grant and his bullies to do even a job of horse stealing if they keep on the way they're going."

Bob uttered an angry snort.

"And was it that crowd pulled me off my horse with a bump?" he exclaimed, as his face turned a shade darker with indignation. "Then I'll have it out with Peg the first time I happen to meet him."

"There they go now, streaking it across that open place; so I reckon they must have their horses somewhere over in that region. Watch me give the cowards a little scare!"

As Frank spoke he leveled his rifle in the direction indicated. A shrill yelp of alarm must have told the four runners what was threatening, for instantly they threw themselves upon the ground, and commenced rolling over and over, as if in the hope of distracting the aim of the boy who sat astride his buckskin horse, and kept his weapon directed toward them.

Even Bob, who was engaged in rubbing his lame knees and elbows, could not refrain from indulging in a loud laugh, which must have reached the ears of the panic-stricken quartette. One succeeded in gaining the shelter of an outlying rock; but the others rolled, and turned head over heels in their desperate break for cover.

"All down in that alley!" sang out Bob, who was rapidly recovering his customary genial disposition, that had been sadly disturbed by the abruptness of his tumble, and the ridiculous nature of his adventure.

"And they bit off more than they could chew," remarked Frank, as he once more slung his rifle over his shoulder. "They expected to have a heap of fun dragging you around; but I reckon Peg got cold feet just as soon as he made the cast, and saw me grabbing for my gun. When he lit out, the rest trailed behind. Oh! they're a sweet bunch, all right."

"Say, do you really think it was Peg who threw that rope?" asked Bob, as he picked up the article in question, and examined it.

"I sure do," replied his chum. "It was as easy a throw as anybody could try for a starter. I heard how Peg was practicing early and late to use a rope. He had that Nick Jennings coaching him, too. Chances are they saw us coming, and Peg, he ups and declares that he could yank one of us off our saddles while we passed. So they hid right here, and made the try."

"Well, it might have been worse," grunted Bob, as he coiled the rope up again. "What if my foot had got caught in the stirrup, and Domino had bolted? Whew! that's my first experience at being roped. I don't like it even a little bit. There they go on their horses, Frank; and see how they act! That's a fine way to slope like mad, isn't it, and then pretend to be so bold? Bah!"

"We're in a good rope, if you care to look at

it that way; also some experience," Frank remarked, with a suggestive smile at his chum.

"Likewise a few bruises, that will feel sore the whole week," added Bob, ruefully.

By this time Domino had stopped prancing around, and allowed his master to once more secure hold of the bridle. They were soon riding along the trail again, just as though nothing out of the way had happened.

"What d'ye suppose Peg Grant and that bunch could have been doing over here?" Bob asked after a time, as though he himself might have been trying to figure things out, but without success.

"Oh! the country is free to anybody who cares to ride," laughed Frank. "Some go in for hunting; others to taking long gallops; while a few like to hover around, and pick up points concerning rival ranches. You know we heard that the Syndicate has an eye on the Arrowhead Ranch. Perhaps Peg may have been sent out to get tabs on the cattle they control, so the count-in won't be a fraud. Men who cheat are always expecting others to try and get them in a dicker."

"They thought you would sure shoot," chuckled Bob; "I never saw such ducking in all my life. And that looked like Peg himself, the one who smashed into that tree."

"It was a sweet bump, and don't you forget it, Bob. Chances are, Peg will be nursing a banged-

up nose longer than your knees and elbows will hurt you."

"Say, I wonder if this is a sample of what's going to strike us on this new venture?" observed the Kentucky lad. "Because things are coming our way pretty swift, so far. On the go just a few hours, and I get yanked out of my saddle. I reckon I must have seen that rope sailing toward me, for I can remember throwing up my arm; and that kept the noose from tightening around my neck."

"Just what happened," nodded Frank; "those of us who have used the lariat a long time always do that sort of thing when we think a rope is whizzing in our direction—throw up a hand, and duck!"

So they rode on, talking about the recent little trouble, and making progress. When noon came a halt was made in order to take a bite, and rest the horses; for the blazing sun came down with a fierce directness that made traveling exhausting to man and beast.

Frank had picked out the place for the noonday rest. A clear little brooklet gurgled out of a split in the rock. Undoubtedly it came from the distant mountains, where snow melted on the peaks throughout the summer, forming many such little streams that eventually joined forces with the mighty Colorado.

"What are you laughing at, Frank?" demanded Bob, as they sat there, munching some of the sandwiches the Chinese cook at the ranch house had put up for them, while the two horses tried to find some stray bunches of grass near the water.

"Just happened to remember a time when I got snaked off the back of a horse, and as sudden as you did just now," replied the prairie boy, still chuckling.

"It must have been funny, then, to make you act like that so long after it happened," remarked Bob. "Tell me about it, Frank."

"That's why I can laugh at it now, because it was several years ago," the other went on. "At the time, I tell you it was no joke. You see, I had jumped on a horse one of the boys was breaking in. The beast was a little ugly still, and I had a hackamore in place of a bridle. When he acted too mean I'd give that a twist, and the cruel rope caught his jaw in a way to bring him to his senses."

"I know what you mean," remarked Bob; "though I've never handled a hackamore myself. Go on, Frank."

"Well, as we whooped along, it happened that the beast took a notion to turn sudden-like, and put into a bunch of trees. And Bob, before I could say Jack Robinson I found myself snatched right off that horse by a crotched limb that hung

low down. The cayuse ran off with me kicking my heels in the air!"

"Just like Absalom was treated so long ago, eh, Frank?"

"Well, I wasn't caught up by my hair, because I wear it short; but I did get caged in that crotch so it took me a long time to wiggle out. I never dared tell the boys about it. Say, they'd have joked me half to death over it. But the shock of being snatched right off the back of my mount was just as bad as what you just went through with. I've never forgotten my feelings as I swung up there, kicking to beat the band, and waving my arms, but unable to help myself for ten long minutes."

"And I suppose I'll remember that queer sensation I had as I felt myself being pulled out of my saddle; and in that flash reckoned it must be some of those reckless cattle rustlers after my good old Domino. Whew! excuse me from another experience along that line, Frank."

"This is a fine place to spend an hour at noon," remarked the other, as he lay back to stretch his legs; for there is always more or less of a cramped sensation during a long horseback ride.

"And with that warm sun it makes a fellow feel sleepy," added Bob. "If I happen to drop off into a little doze, please don't wake me up too

sudden. I might think I was fast in the noose of another rope, and strike out, reckless like."

"I'll keep my hands off you for some little time," declared Frank; "for I can see that you're marked 'dangerous,' like a box of dynamite at the mines."

When the hour had passed, both boys announced their readiness to make a fresh start; and although the heat was still quite severe, they threw the saddles on the horses, and were soon off.

Hours later the two found themselves considering the subject of a camp. The afternoon was wearing away, and, ere long, night would be at hand. The moon, past its first quarter, hung in the sky overhead, so that they need not anticipate darkness with the coming of sunset.

"Look away off yonder; that line of trees seems inviting a closer acquaintance," declared Frank, pointing; "because, unless I'm greatly mistaken, there must be a stream of some sort there. Let's wind up the day with a little race, Bob!"

The Kentucky boy was always willing for a trial dash; hence they allowed the two horses to have their heads across the level plains. And, as often happened, they arrived at their goal neck and neck.

"Call it a draw!" laughed Frank, as he threw himself to the ground.

"I'm willing," replied his chum, proud because the black was able to keep on even terms with a horse born and brought up in that country.

First the boys attended to their faithful steeds; and, only after seeing them comfortable, did they think to take a drink from the stream, and begin to get a camp in readiness for the coming night.

Frank was putting up a little silk tent which he had brought along when he heard Buckskin snorting loudly. He knew that something strange must have startled the little beast. Many a time had he depended on Buckskin to warn him, during the night, of danger; now, leaving his work, he hastened to snatch up his rifle, after which he called to his chum.

"Bob! this way, quick!"

Young Archer had been dipping up some clear water for the coffee when he heard this sudden hail. It seemed to breathe of peril; and, quick to act, he started for the spot where his companion stood. Seeing that Frank was staring upward toward the sky Bob allowed his wondering gaze to travel in that direction. What he discovered filled him with mingled awe and bewilderment.

"Say, Frank!" he called out; "am I dreaming, or is that really a runaway balloon drifting this way, with a man hanging to the broken basket?"

CHAPTER III

A VISITOR FROM THE SKIES

"A BALLOON—yes, that's what it must be, Bob!" exclaimed the prairie boy, who had doubtless never before set eyes on such an object as now dawned upon his startled vision.

"Sure it is, Frank; I've seen 'em lots of times at the country fairs in Kentucky," Bob went on, almost breathlessly, as he reached the side of his chum.

The two stood watching with wide eyes the approach of the bulky, unwieldly object, that nearly dragged along the ground at times, since it was in a partly collapsed state.

"He seems to be waving his arms at us, Bob!" declared Frank, whose eyes were nearly as keen as those of a hawk.

"Yes, he is trying to tell us something, Frank," replied the other.

"Perhaps he's in a peck of trouble," suggested the other.

"I'm most sure of that, for the old gas-bag is half empty; but the wind carries it along, you see,"

Bob remarked, as the balloon continued to head directly for the spot where they stood.

"Perhaps he's afraid it'll hit the trees?" cried Frank.

"Huh! I'd rather think he's afraid it *won't* do that same!" Bob ventured. "For it looks to me as if that man would give just anything to be safe on the ground again. See how wild he is getting, Frank!"

"We must do something for him!" declared Bob's chum.

With his eye he gauged the coming on the runaway balloon. Then he started to run rapidly forward, turning a little to the left.

"Think it's going to come here?" questioned Bob, who had obediently trailed along at the heels of his chum; for Bob knew that as a rule Frank could be depended upon to do the right thing.

"Unless there's a sudden shift of the wind he's bound to; and I don't expect that to happen," came the reply.

Indeed, Bob could himself see that the chances were as ten to one that they now stood directly in the path of the coming balloon. It had considerable momentum, and there was a question as to whether two boys would be able to curb the rush of the big gas-bag.

When Bob thought this he failed to give his comrade full credit for his sagacity. Frank had

anticipated just that thing. And more than that, he was prepared to meet the emergency.

Frank was so constituted that he could apply such practices as came into his daily life to the needs of the hour. For one thing, he had noticed that a long and apparently stout rope was trailing down on the ground. Perhaps it had once had an anchor of some sort attached; but if so, this had long since been torn away.

Bob was nerving himself for a tug of war when the two of them threw their combined weight on that rope. He was therefore greatly astonished to hear his chum suddenly exclaim:

"Leave it to me, Bob; but stand by to help, if I call on you!"

With the words Frank jumped forward. The balloon had bobbed up again in one of its queer movements, and passed over their heads. They could hear the bare-headed man in the broken basket shouting at the top of his voice:

"Grab that rope! Hold her, till I can drop out!"

Then Frank made a dive, and the rope was in his hands. Another quick movement that fairly dazzled Bob, and he saw the prairie boy whip the end three times around the butt of a small but fairly stout tree that lay within reach. The boy, who was accustomed to roping cattle had used the sapling as a "snubbing post."

There was a shock, as the rope came taut. The

tree bent far over, and Bob half expected to see it torn up by the roots, or else break in two. Neither of these catastrophes came to pass, for that sapling was made of stern stuff. It bent, but did not give way. And the mad journey of the runaway balloon seemed to have been brought to a successful termination, there, close to the little patch of timber that grew along the stream near which the saddle boys had started to make their lone camp.

It was almost ludicrous to see how quickly the man in the basket started to get over the edge, and slide down that rope to the ground.

"He's badly hurt!" exclaimed Bob, seeing the air-voyager tumble in a heap, as though unable to stand upon his legs.

Both boys were at his side in another second. They had thought the aeronaut must have swooned because of his injuries, or the sudden sensation of relief after expecting the worst that could befall him; but on their arrival he made a movement as though trying to get up.

"I guess I'm in a bad way, boys," he groaned. "Feels like one of my legs has been fractured. The balloon smashed against a rock as I came over the top of the ridge away over yonder. That was what broke the basket. It nearly sent me out, and ever since I seem to have lost my head."

"Well, you're safe on the ground now," said Frank, as he bent over the injured man.

"We were just making camp when he sighted you," said Bob. "And if you say the word we'll get you over to the place, and do all we can to help you."

"Oh! thank you, boys," the other said, eagerly; "it's very kind of you. Perhaps with your help I might hobble along in some fashion. But I can't get to see a doctor any too soon to suit me."

The two boys exchanged glances. How in the wide world they were going to get the wounded man to a town, where his broken leg could be attended before serious complications set in, neither of them could even guess.

But they helped him get on his feet, and foot by foot make for the spot on the bank of the small river where the tent was standing. He groaned frequently, as though suffering great pain; but in the end they managed to half carry him to the camp.

Here, on one of the blankets, he was made as comfortable as possible. While the daylight still lasted Frank took a look at his limb; leaving to his chum the task of preparing supper.

"It's broken, you find?" asked the man, with great concern.

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid it is; and pretty badly fractured at that," Frank answered. "We'll try

and make you as comfortable as we can to-night. In the morning perhaps some way for getting you to a doctor may be found."

At the time Frank did not know in the slightest degree just how such a thing could be accomplished. But he was not one to cross a bridge before coming to it. There were a good many hours between supper time and morning; and surely one of them would be able to think of some remedy.

As they had been sent off on a very important errand to Cherry Blossom Mine, where it was suspected that strange things were in progress, it was hardly to be expected that they could spare the time needed to take this stranger to the nearest town, some twenty miles down the river.

Still, both boys were tender-hearted, and apt to strain a point rather than appear cruel toward a fellow human being.

"Is there any way to save the balloon?" asked Frank, wishing to divert the attention of the groaning aeronaut from his own pains, to some other object in which he might take an interest.

"Hang the balloon!" the man said, angrily. "I never want to set eyes on one again. I was a fool to believe I could play the part of an aeronaut. It's nearly been the death of me; and all for nothing; all for nothing!"

Frank, of course, could not imagine what the

man meant by those words. He seemed to be deeply moved, as though some pet scheme which he had been trying to carry out had proven a dead failure. Perhaps he was an explorer, and had hoped to investigate the secrets of those gaunt mountains which had never been climbed, and which might be rich in precious ores!

Frank bathed the injured limb as soon as he could get some warm water. There was really nothing else he could do, not being a surgeon. Of course many cowboys can perform rude operations, when stern necessity requires; and Frank had before now, set a broken bone fairly well. But in this case it was a compound fracture, and splinters of bone would have to be taken away before the process of healing could begin.

Bob, meanwhile, managed to get supper ready. He announced the meal even as Frank finished his labors in connection with the wounded aeronaut.

"Perhaps you might be able to eat a little; or at least have a cup of coffee," Frank remarked, after he had propped the other up against a tree.

Somehow the man looked a little more cheerful. His leg did not hurt so badly, for the numb stage had set in; and so long as he could remain quiet it would not be so bad.

"This is mighty nice of you two boys," he declared, showing that he felt he owed them more

than common gratitude. "Yes, I haven't eaten a bite for many hours, and that coffee certainly smells good. I will try a little. I'm beginning to pick up hopes that after all I may be able to pull through."

So Bob poured out a cup of the fragrant Java, and brought it over to where the wounded aeronaut lay.

"How will you have it, Professor?" he asked, "with condensed milk, or plain black?"

"A little of the milk, please, my boy; and as I was just saying to your comrade, I owe you both a heavy debt. After all, a man's life is worth more than anything else. But don't call me Professor, for I'm not anything of the sort. Jared Scott is the name I answer to; and I'm from Iowa, though long out in the wild and woolly West. May I ask your name, and that of the fine fellow who made me so comfortable?"

"My name is Bob Archer," readily responded the other; "and my home used to be in Kentucky. My chum has always lived here in the cow and mining country. His father owns a big ranch; and we're right now on the way to the Cherry Blossom Mine on business. His name is Haywood—Frank Haywood."

Bob heard the man give a low cry, and saw him staring, as though the mention of that name had given him a great shock!

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERY OF THE PACKET

Bob was not a suspicious boy by nature. Consequently, the first thought that occurred to him was that the wrecked balloonist must have been seized with a sudden acute twinge of pain.

"Does it hurt so bad as that?" he asked, tenderly.

The other shut his teeth hard together, winked a few times, and then seemed able to master his emotions.

"I never had such pain in all my life," he said, in a voice that shook. "But it's gone again now, and I feel easier. Bob, you said your name was, and his Frank Haywood. His father, then, must be the Colonel Haywood I've heard talked about as one of the richest men in this section."

"That's Frank's father, all right, Mr. Scott," Bob went on, adding enthusiastically, "and Frank's the best chum I ever knew in all my life; as good-hearted as the day is long, loyal and brave. When he saw your trouble he would have risked his life, if necessary, to help you; but then, that's Frank Haywood, every time."

The balloonist shifted his glance toward Frank, who was just then pouring himself out a cup of coffee.

"And me a stranger, too!" he muttered, turning strangely red in the face, Bob thought, and also swallowing something that seemed to come up in his throat.

Then he put the tin cup to his mouth. Perhaps the coffee was hotter than Mr. Scott had expected, for when he lowered the cup again Bob thought he could see a trace of tears in his eyes. But then a renewal of the pain in his leg might account for that—or something else of which he, Bob, knew nothing.

"How is the coffee?" he asked, solicitously, for he disliked to see any one suffer, and felt for the wounded man.

"Splendid! and it somehow seems to cheer me up," replied the other; though while speaking his eyes still continued to stray over to where Frank knelt, as if possibly the prairie boy had appealed to him especially.

"I'll fetch you over a share of what we've got, Mr. Scott; and I hope you'll have appetite enough to enjoy it," Bob went on. "In a case like this, it's necessary for the patient to keep up his strength, you know."

"You are right, Bob," replied the other, giving him a faint smile; "and it's good of you and

your chum to take such care of a stranger who's dropped out of the clouds, and about whom neither of you know a thing."

"But you're hurt, you see," remarked Bob, just as though that circumstance would account for almost anything they might do for him.

The wounded man did eat rather heartily, after all. He was also somewhat morose for a time after they had finished the meal; his dark brows knitting as if he might be deep in serious thought.

"Perhaps he's wondering how under the sun we're going to get him to town in the morning?" suggested Bob, who was just as eager to get a hint from Frank in that line as Mr. Scott could be, for he did not know a thing about it.

"Now, I was thinking," Frank remarked, "that perhaps he's bothered because some pet scheme of his has been knocked sky-high by the smash of the balloon. Who knows what sort of business brought him out here with that gas-bag? You know he kept saying 'all for nothing, too; all for nothing!'"

"Frank," said the other boy, in low tones, for he did not wish the balloonist to suspect that they were talking about him; "I reckon you're right, after all. He is bothered over something that's gone to smash, and it isn't the balloon either."

"But it's none of our business, you know,"

urged Frank; "and we don't want to seem too curious."

"But, Frank, we just can't go off in the morning and leave the poor fellow here, you know; yet how under the sun can we get him to town? He couldn't ride a horse, with that terribly broken leg, could he?"

"I'm afraid not," answered the other, smiling. "But I was thinking, Bob, that if the worst came, we could make some sort of raft, and in that way I might drift with him down river, while you followed along the shore with the horses."

"Well, if you don't just beat the world thinking up things, Frank!" exclaimed the Kentucky boy; and then seeing the man looking at them curiously, he added in a louder voice: "What do you think of that for a scheme, Mr. Scott—my chum says that if you can't ride a horse in the morning we might make a raft, and he'll run you to town that way, while I bring the horses along the bank."

"Could it be done?" asked the wounded man, as his black eyes sparkled with admiration, and perhaps pleasure.

"I think so," replied Frank. "I've heard something about this river from our cow punchers. It's swift, but deep, and without many rapids. Yes, given a little time, and we can make a raft that would be safe. And by night, or long before, we'd likely reach a doctor."

"But in that way you'd lose a whole day, Frank," remarked the balloonist.

"Oh! well, it just can't be helped. Time is of value to us just now, I admit; but it would have to be something far more than the possible loss of money that could make me desert anyone in trouble. My dad would never forgive me, Mr. Scott, if I ran away, and left you here all alone!"

The balloonist tried to say something, but his voice failed him. He could only draw a long breath, and look steadily at Frank. Such sentiments evidently touched him even more than the able manner in which Frank had snubbed the runaway balloon, so that he could escape from the broken basket.

Nor did he attempt to join in the conversation of the two lads as they sat by the little fire later on and talked; though Frank imagined that Mr. Scott seemed considerably interested in what they were saying.

Sometimes the talk was about the ranch where they enjoyed such good times; and numerous allusions were made to the family, the cowboys, and the adventures that had already fallen to their lot.

Then again it might be Bob would ask questions concerning the possible cause of that hasty summons of Colonel Haywood to Cherry Blossom

Mine; and what sort of new trouble might await them there.

Strikes were not unknown in that region; and somehow the boys seemed to imagine they would be called upon to face some such thing as that. Miners from Mexico sometimes fomented trouble, and a stern hand was needed to keep it down.

Finally the lads found themselves growing sleepy, and announced their intention of turning in. With the sagacious Buckskin hovering near by, and capable of giving warning should danger threaten, neither of the saddle boys felt called upon to lose any sleep by standing watch.

Frank fixed the injured balloonist as well as he was able, before seeking his blanket. They had even managed to convey their uninvited guest to the little tent, despite his protests. As for themselves, they could settle down outside; nor would they have any reason to regret it, because the night promised to be a calm one.

It passed away without any alarm. In the morning the boys were early astir, and making preparations for breakfast, for it looked as though they would have to put in this day doing an act of mercy.

"The old balloon's gone to nothing during the night," announced Bob, after he had gone out to investigate; but Mr. Scott shook his head as though it no longer appealed to him in the least.

If he had ever expected to become an aeronaut the desire had all been taken from him by his recent experience; and he vowed that if he lived through this trouble never again would he ever trust himself off the solid earth.

While the boys were engaged in getting the morning meal Mr. Scott seemed to be writing something on a sheet of paper which he had torn from a note book. This he slipped into a packet he had with him, and sealed up hastily.

"Hello! Frank, look what's coming down the river!" called Bob, just as they were ready to sit down and eat.

It was a boat, and a fairly large one at that, loaded with all sorts of green vegetables. Frank could hardly believe his eyes.

"Here's luck, Mr. Scott!" he exclaimed. "This man must have a little truck patch in some favored place above, where there's rich ground, and plenty of water for irrigation. He's on his way to town now, with a load that will fetch him a heap of money. We must hail him, and get him to take you along. Perhaps he'd agree to carry the balloon, too, if you wanted."

"Don't speak of the balloon; I hate the thought of it!" said the other; "but I'm glad there's a chance for my getting to a doctor before long, and without taking you boys away from your work."

Frank jumped up, and waved to the "trucker" in the boat, who quickly landed. He looked a little dubious at the suggestion of carrying a man with a broken leg all the way to town; but when Mr. Scott took out several large bills, and offered them to him, he quickly found that he could make room.

"Stop over a bit and have breakfast with us," said Bob, with true Kentucky generosity; and the "trucker" agreed willingly enough, for he scented the fragrant coffee.

Then, a little later, they managed to carry the wounded man to the boat, where a bed had been prepared for him amid the green stuff.

"Good-by, Mr. Scott!" said Frank, after Bob had shaken hands with the wounded balloonist. "We sure hope you come out all right; and we'd have done what we said we would if this boat hadn't come along in time."

"I know you would, Frank," said the other, with a queer look on his face; then he suddenly drew out the packet, and offered it to the boy. "Take it, please," he insisted, seeing Frank hesitate. "Only promise me that you will not break the seal for seven days! By then things will have taken a turn for me, one way or the other. Give me your word, Frank!"

Mystified by this Frank could only promise. Then the boat pushed off, and the last they saw

of Jared Scott was when he turned half-way around to wave a hand.

And Frank stood there, staring at the little packet the wounded balloonist had forced him to accept under conditions that only added to the puzzle.

CHAPTER V

IN SEARCH OF GAME

"WHAT under the sun did he mean by that, Frank?" asked Bob, after the boat had swept around a bend on the swift river, and vanished from their view.

"I declare I can't tell you," chuckled his chum, looking at the envelope, which he was turning over in his hand.

"He was writing something, and then I saw him put it in that enevlope, or packet, smiling all the time as if delighted; which I thought was rather queer for a man who was suffering from such a bad leg," Bob went on.

"Well, we must let it go at guessing; because you heard me promise not to tear this envelope open for seven days," Frank remarked.

"That was the queer part of it," the other pursued, for anything touching on a mystery always excited Bob. "Now if, for instance, he had been making out a check, thinking to reward us for saving his life, he wouldn't have gone about it that way, and make you give such a

promise. Besides I saw that he just tore a blank page out of a note book, and scribbled on that."

Frank calmly put the strange little packet safely away in an inside pocket of his jacket.

"Seven days from now we'll take a peep, Bob," he observed, drily; "just try and curb your curiosity till then; won't you? And now, we'd better forget all about Mr. Jared Scott, and his balloon. It served to break up the monotony of our trip, and cost us little besides our time."

"All right," assented Bob; "but something tells me, Frank, that this isn't the last we'll hear from this Mr. Scott. The way he looked at you told me he sure had something on his mind. Shall we throw our saddles on right now, and get busy?"

Frank, instead of replying, began to gather things together. The tent came down in a "jiffy," as Bob called it; the cooking things were soon placed in the blankets; and presently not a thing had been neglected.

Bob went over to where the pile of silk representing the abandoned balloon, lay. When he came back he was carrying quite a piece of the material, which he said he expected to keep, as a souvenir of the affair.

"Perhaps, now, you're thinking of some day taking up the life of a balloonist?" suggested Frank, with a laugh.

"None of that for me," Bob answered. "After seeing how Mr. Scott fared, I'd hate to think of an experience of that sort. And just imagine him being carried over the tops of those mountains at a tremendous whirl. He said he even banged into a rock that stuck up above the rest. And Frank, do you see, he came out of just the same quarter we are heading into!"

The two boys looked at each other. It was as if some thought had flashed into both of their minds, to the effect that, perhaps, the circumstances might prove to be more than just a mere coincidence. But farther than this they were not able to go; so nothing was said.

In a few minutes more both sprang into the saddle. Then the eager horses were off on the jump across the plains, heading toward the very mountains which the wounded aeronaut declared he had crossed while cruising in his runaway balloon.

"Oh! we forgot to ask Mr. Scott how he happened to get in trouble!" Bob suddenly cried, after he had been turning around to take a last look at the pile of silk which had once been a balloon.

"He told me while I was fixing his broken limb," Frank mentioned. "That is, he said that in his hurry to get away, he was unlucky enough to break something about the balloon that con-

trolled the valve. So he was really at the mercy of the wind. He said he had been knocking around for many hours—in fact that he had been high up in the air part of the day; until the gas began to escape, and then the balloon dropped until he just scraped over the mountains, as he mentioned. Later on he came close to the ground; but was going so fast he hated to jump."

"Huh! I don't blame him, what with that broken leg," commented Bob, who was keeping alongside his galloping chum. "But if he was up all day, he must have come hundreds of miles. Wonder if he started at Los Angeles, in California?"

"No, I don't believe that," Frank went on, thoughtfully; "because I remember his saying that he seemed to go in circles, and that after being up all those hours, when he sank down again, he was within twenty miles of where he started."

"Oh! well, perhaps some day we'll know more about it." Bob remarked, carelessly. "He must have come from some city where they had gas. Perhaps he was doing it on a wager. They do all sorts of queer things nowadays, with the idea of taking up a dare."

"Seven days and we'll know, I reckon," laughed Frank, touching his breast, where in the recesses of a pocket that little packet lay with its mysterious contents.

"I'm glad, anyhow, that we didn't have to make that raft," declared Bob.

"Same here," chuckled his comrade, "it would have been a tougher job than either of us thought, with only a little camp hatchet to cut logs. But I would have done it if that trucker hadn't come along in his bull boat."

"Which, I take it, means his craft was made from the tough skins of bulls; is that right, Frank?"

"Sure," Frank replied. "They make fine boats, too, and I'm told are used even up in the Saskatchewan river country. Far better than dugouts, too. But our trail leads us through that faraway mountain range, you know. Hope we're on the other side of it by to-night. All depends on how rough the traveling is, after we strike the rise."

"Perhaps, if we look sharp, we may see the very rock at the peak that the balloon banged up against!" suggested Bob, with a grin.

"No telling," Frank remarked. "But if he had been knocked out of the old basket on top of the ridge, he would have been a goner, sure enough. No help could reach him there."

They galloped on for several hours. All the time the mountains seemed to rise up closer, though distances were very deceptive in that clear atmosphere.

But no stop was made until noon. Then they found themselves at the base of the high ridge, that loomed up far into the clouds.

"If we could only find a way around this, instead of climbing over," observed the Kentucky lad, as he looked upward with a sigh of despair.

"Hold on, its bite isn't as bad as its bark," broke in Frank. "From dad's directions I understand that to try and go around would mean three days' ride, because the ridge runs quite a ways in both directions. Then there's a canyon here, just as if Nature wanted to help a fellow cross over. It doesn't go to near the top; and horses can easily tramp through it."

"Glad to hear that," declared Bob, with an air of relief. "I might climb up to the top yonder, on my hands and knees; but I'd hate the job of taking Domino there."

"Well, let's hold up, and take a breathing spell," Frank suggested, as he reined in, and threw himself to the ground.

Presently the boys were stretching themselves, while the horses sought the water hole near by, to quench their thirst. A "snack" was eaten, Then Bob, remarking that he believed he would take a little look around, as the place had a promising air to an ambitious hunter, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and stalked off.

"Don't go far, Bob," said his chum; "and

be back in half an hour or so; for if we hope to get across the range by nightfall we'll have to be making a start inside of an hour or so."

"All right, Frank, you can count on me," was the reply Bob threw back, as he plunged into the chaparral, with his hunter's instinct aroused.

Ten minutes had passed since he left Frank. As yet he had seen nothing more than a brace of long-eared jack rabbits; and Bob hated to fire at such ignoble game when his mind was set upon something better.

Still, jack rabbit stew was not bad, and if it came to it he supposed there was nothing else to be done but knock over a couple. But he would go on a little further before giving up. Frank had limited him to half an hour; and that would leave him just fifteen minutes in which to retrace his steps.

Ah! what was that he saw through the bushes ahead? Something moved, and as he looked closer Bob discovered that it was a deer. The wind was coming from the feeding animal, directly toward him, which would account for his having been able to approach as near as he had without being scented.

So Bob, dropping on his knees, crawled a little closer. Then, seeing uneasiness in the game, and knowing that he could hardly hope to get any closer, the boy raised himself cautiously, and took

aim, resting one elbow on his knee for support.

With the report the deer sprang into the air. Bob knew that his aim must have been true, and that the timid animal had received its death wound.

But something that was entirely unexpected by Bob took place immediately after he had pulled the trigger. He heard what seemed to be a half suppressed snarl, and was even in the act of trying to turn, while in that awkward position, when he received a violent blow on the shouder that sent him sprawling.

And, even as he fell, Bob had a glimpse of a terrifying beast with yellow eyes that had dropped from the trees upon his shoulders. He knew that it must be a panther that had been trying to stalk the feeding deer!

CHAPTER VI

SURPRISING FRANK

THERE are times when one simply acts from impulse rather than from design. And this was certainly one of those occasions.

Bob had been thrown aside by the stroke from the heavy paw of the descending beast. He simply kept on rolling, and thus avoided being pounced upon when the panther, like a domestic cat cheated out of its prey by the first jump, turned to make a second attempt.

Better still, Bob had been wise enough not to loosen his grip on his gun. Hence he was not unarmed when he threw himself behind a friendly tree, and fumbled at the mechanism of the repeating rifle, meaning to eject the useless empty brass shell, and bring another from the magazine into the firing chamber.

It seems a very simple act when attempted under ordinary conditions. But if a young hunter can manage to accomplish the same when an angry panther is within five feet of him, and

ready for a renewal of its attack, he deserves much praise. Four out of five would make a mess of trying to work the "pump-gun," with results not at all pleasant.

But Bob went through with the two movements necessary to attain this end without a hitch. This left his gun in condition for immediate use, with the hammer pushed back, ready for a discharge.

Just then he saw that the big cat was about to launch itself through the air again. It had crouched, with its head between its forepaws; and there was a "hunching" movement to the whole body. Bob had seen exactly the same when a pet Maltese cat was about to spring on an unsuspecting sparrow.

He knew that a second would count for a great deal under such circumstances. It would not do to even try and raise the gun to his shoulder to aim; for the panther might be in the air before he could glance along that shiny barrel.

Instinct again forced Bob to pull the trigger. How he did it he never could explain; but he fired the shot from his hip, and with his eyes glued upon the figure of his enemy.

Bob had all the instincts of a true hunter. When he heard a story told that had to do with an encounter with dangerous game he never failed to ask a multitude of questions. And in this way he had gained a pretty good idea of how success-

ful big game hunters carry themselves under perilous conditions.

Hence he had no sooner fired than he hastened to fling himself behind another tree that happened to be within reach.

Something came slap against it. He heard a low growl, that seemed to change into short angry whines; and glancing around the tree, after he had made his gun serviceable again, he discovered the animal kicking its last, biting at every object within reach of its teeth, and evidently dying hard.

There was no longer any danger to be apprehended from this source; and it was only his desire not to allow needless pain that urged Bob to once more throw his rifle forward, and pull the trigger.

Then the panther lay very still, and the lad knew that the last spark of life had departed.

Bob stood there, looking around him. He was trembling violently, yet it was the result of excitement and action, rather than anything like fear.

In fact, one thing had followed so fast upon the heels of others, that thus far he had not found time to be afraid.

"Probably I would have been, if the beast had given me a chance," he said afterward, when telling Frank about the happening.

He had done an amazing thing—killed a deer

and a panther, both within the space of three minutes or less.

Of course Frank must have heard the several shots, and might be growing anxious about him. So Bob decided to return to camp. On the horses they could cover the intervening ground in a short time; and after that take as much of the venison along as Frank thought best.

After noting the spot so that he could easily locate it again, Bob hurried away. He found his chum looking anxiously for him; and noted the smile of relief that came upon Frank's face as he broke cover close by.

"He got away after all that hammering, eh?" remarked the prairie lad; but in a good natured manner.

"After we start, suppose we run over that way a little," said Bob. "It won't take a long time; and there's something I'd like to show you."

"Sure," replied Frank, as he prepared to mount. "No use asking what it is; for once you've made up your mind to keep a surprise, a mountain wouldn't move *you,* Bob."

First of all, Bob led him by a round-about way to where the deer lay, just as it had fallen, although Bob had stopped long enough to bleed his quarry.

"How's that?" he asked a little proudly.

Frank jumped down, and bent over the animal.

And, just as his comrade anticipated, he almost immediately exclaimed.

"Your bullet took him directly back of the foreshoulder, Bob; and must have cut into his heart. Then what in the wide world did you want to fire twice again for?"

"Oh! I had a little dispute with a rival hunter, and he thought I'd played him a mean trick to step in when he was creeping up on the game. So we had it out; and if you come this way, Frank, I'll show you how it all ended."

When the wondering Frank looked down on the sleek form of the mountain cat, he emitted a whistle that meant astonishment.

"Great governor! however did you do it; and come out of the scrape without even a single scratch, too?" he asked, turning on Bob.

"Well, hardly that," replied the other, wincing when Frank unconsciously laid a hand on his left shoulder. "If you look where you touched me you'll see that my jacket and flannel shirt are clawed some. I reckon there's need of that wonderful permanganate of potash wash that you think so much of."

"And you'll have to let me look at that shoulder right away, son," declared Frank. "I never take any chances when clawed by an animal that lives on flesh. If blood poisoning ever sets in, it's bound to be a bad job. And while I'm

working you just pitch in, and tell me all about it; d'ye hear?"

Of course Bob complied. He was just aching to tell the story anyhow, boy-like. And Frank could easily picture the exciting scene, as he looked around him, and noted where the beast had first clawed up the ground when he just missed the form of the human hunter who had invaded his private preserves.

"Whew! things seem to be coming your way right along, Bob," he remarked after both the story, and his dressing of the trifling wounds, were finished.

"They say it's better to be born lucky than rich," his chum laughed. "And if I can keep on in this way I've no kick coming. But how about the deer meat, Frank? We ought to take some of that along with us, hadn't we?"

"I should say yes," declared Frank, as he pulled out his hunting knife, and once more moved toward the spot where the deer lay.

"But I'd like ever so much to have this nice pelt to remember the affair by," Bob remarked, casting a regretful eye back toward the dead panther.

"Well, I'll take it off, if you will carve some meat from your deer," Frank answered, knowing just how the tenderfoot felt about the matter. "Of course, we couldn't think of taking it along

with us now; but I'll hang it up in a tree, and on our way home we'll try and remember it. How's that, Bob?"

"Fine and dandy," replied the other. "I won't promise to cut the steaks as well as you could; but I'll do my best; and they can be eaten anyhow. So here goes!"

He had, before now, taken some lessons in cutting up game, and was not altogether ignorant of the method. And by the time the practical Frank had hung the skin of the panther high up on a branch, Bob was on hand with a bundle of fresh meat, wrapped in a part of the deer's hide.

"Say, if we keep on like this I reckon our new trip will see all the others, and go them one better," declared Bob, after he had fastened the package to his horse.

They rode off, and Frank, having found the pass leading over the mountain ridge, the laborious task of climbing the height was commenced.

But both horses proved game. At half-past three Frank announced that they had ascended as high as the canyon ran. From that point the pass would decline, making it much easier for the animals. Here Bob saw his first flock of great vultures, perched upon some of the high rocks the balloonist had spoken of.

During the balance of the afternoon they rode steadily downward; and as the evening drew near

Frank declared that they were going to make their point, which was to leave the mountain range behind them.

"To-morrow we cross another mesa," he said, "and then come to the mountains where the Cherry Blossom blooms."

"Then we stand a chance of getting there by to-morrow night?" asked Bob.

"Unless something stops us that I don't see just now," replied the prairie boy, as he looked around as usual for a good camp-site.

Before the sun's glow had begun to fade from the glorious western heavens the two saddle boys had turned their horses loose, and were hard at work with their preparations for spending another night under the moon and stars.

CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP

"FRANK, wake up!"

Possibly that was the first time on record when the late tenderfoot had found a chance to arouse his chum from sleep, and the strange part of it was Frank never knew how it happened that he had been slumbering so heavily on that particular night.

When his comrade shook him he was of course wide awake in a second; and sat up in the tent, that gave very little more than head room for the two.

"Well, what's wrong?" he asked, in a whisper.

"I happened to wake up, and heard Buckskin snorting to beat the band," said Bob, his own voice showing evidence of trembling. "Listen, there he goes again, Frank! Doesn't that sound as if he wanted to let you know?"

"That's just what it does, Bob!"

Even as he uttered these low words Frank was reaching out for his gun. He felt very queer-

ly about the fact of his not having heard the least sound until his comrade aroused him.

"My! but I must have been in the grip of a nightmare!" Bob heard him mutter.

Both boys now had hold of their guns. Frank was the first to crawl out from the shelter of the small tent. He thrust his head from under the canvas, as a cautious old tortoise might, when taking an observation, in order to make sure the coast was clear.

The moon hung in the western sky. Judging from its position, Frank, who always studied these things, guessed that the hour must be somewhere near half-past one; for the moon was due to set shortly after two on this night.

As he crawled out he found himself in the shelter of the cluster of trees under which the tent had been erected. The fact was of considerable importance just then, since his movements were apt to be screened, should there be any enemies around.

Buckskin was snorting again at a great rate. Frank had given him all the rope when fixing him for the night. He could be heard plunging around; but there seemed an absence of galloping, such as the prairie horse was apt to indulge in when he did not like the way things looked.

Frank's first thought was that, after all, it might prove to be a false alarm. Perhaps Buck-

skin had only managed to catch his tether in some root; and finding himself held up short was trying to notify his master, so that Frank could come to his relief.

"What is it?" breathed a voice in his ear, as Bob joined him.

"I don't know yet," Frank replied, but from the manner in which he said it, his comrade understood that he fully intended finding out soon.

When Frank started to creep away Bob followed. He did not mean to be left in the lurch, if there was any excitement on foot.

Of course Bob was greatly exercised. He had not been through an experience like this as often as the boy who had spent his life, or at least pretty much all of it, on the range, and hence knew what a cowboy has to endure.

Bob was secretly not a little provoked because his chum had thus far given him no hint whatever as to his suspicions. For, of course, it went without saying that Frank could make a pretty good guess from Buckskin's actions whether it might turn out to be wolves, a hungry panther, or Indians from the reservation, sneaking around to see what they could pick up on the sly.

When Buckskin stopped his snorting for a few seconds, Frank would himself halt, and appear to be listening intently.

Bob put in such opportunities by using his eyes

to the best possible advantage; but he could see absolutely nothing, as yet.

As they were steadily approaching the place where the two horses had been staked out, Bob knew that presently they must arrive at a point where the animals at least could be seen. And then it should be possible to learn the cause of all this commotion.

Now the second animal seemed to join in with fresh vigor. Domino, although not a native of the plains, and hitherto unaccustomed to such perils as existed there, must have been taking lessons from the yellow pony.

"Whew!" Bob whispered to himself, "aren't they just keeping it up lively, though? Domino is trying to beat the other at his own game, and he can do it, too, every time, once he learns how!"

Frank nudged him with his foot, which was a plain invitation to stop holding any conversation with himself; for Bob's whisper had been in the nature of a low grumble.

The trample of horses' hoofs now sounded more clearly; and Bob, using his eyes to the best of his ability, found that he could see a wildly moving form. Undoubtedly this must be Domino, rushing around as far as his rope would permit.

Frank had reached a point where he fancied

that a change in their tactics would prove of advantage. Progress in this creeping fashion was too slow. He surprised Bob by suddenly jumping to his feet, and starting forward, at the same time shouting over his shoulder:

"Come on! Horse thieves, Bob!"

He could not possibly have said anything that would have electrified the Kentucky boy more than that. Bob loved his black mount, and it would have almost broken his heart had anyone managed to steal Domino.

He instantly followed Frank in making a forward rush.

There was a confusion of sounds just ahead, amid which could be heard the vicious squealing of the buckskin pony, which, being possibly held a prisoner by its entangled rope, could only let fly with its heels in the hope of beating off the enemy.

Frank could see by now, his eyes being better than those of his chum. He paid no attention to the wildly cavorting Domino, knowing that so long as the black had the benefit of his entire rope it would indeed be a bold, as well as skillful rustler, who could throw a leg over his glossy back.

And, even as they were thus hurrying to arrive upon the scene, a dusky figure suddenly made a flying leap, landing on the back of the yellow

pony. Frank saw the man bending forward the very instant he gained his seat. He knew what that action meant, and that a keen knife was being drawn over the holding lariat.

Now Buckskin was free from his tether. He could be seen for the first time rearing in the air, as a cow pony always will when full of spirit, or excited.

Frank had thrown his rifle half way to his shoulder on the impulse of the moment. Then, as if on second thought, he let it drop again; and Bob actually believed he heard him give vent to a chuckle.

"Why don't you shoot at him, Frank?" the latter cried, excitedly. "Look! he's going to run away with your horse!"

"Is he?" answered Frank. "Well, perhaps you've got another guess coming, Bob. Maybe the shoe is on the other foot; and Buckskin is going to run away with him! Watch what happens, Bob!"

"Oh! look at the pony kick up!" gasped Bob. "But that's a good rider, Frank. He sticks like a leech, and he may beat the horse at his own game!"

"Wait!"

Frank knew his horse. He had won a victory over the vicious little beast only after the longest fight recorded in the history of Circle Ranch.

And among the cow punchers there were few indeed who could stick on the back of Buckskin when he started his bucking tactics.

There the two boys stood, in the shadow of the trees, looking upon as stirring a little scene as could be imagined. Bob clutched his chum's arm, and almost held his breath with awe as he gazed; for this certainly excelled anything he had ever witnessed.

The intending horse thief was indeed a clever rider. No other could have held his seat on the bare back of that jumping pony for half a minute, with only the assistance of a fragment of rope to give him support.

And it was the admiration Frank felt for the fellow's grit that really kept him from resorting to his gun to wind matters up. Besides, Frank believed that in due time Buckskin would amply prove that he was able to take care of himself.

Sometimes the maddened pony would seem to have its four hoofs in the air at once. Then, quickly following, Buckskin would raise himself on his hind legs, and make a furious whirl calculated to unseat all but the most expert rider.

The fellow stuck through it all. Three times Frank gave a grunt as he thought the end had come, for he fancied the rider must be toppling from his seat; but in each instance the unknown thief managed to recover himself before it was too late.

Perhaps by this time the fellow would have been only too glad of a chance to make a swift retreat; but the truth was he did not dare throw himself to the ground with that enraged little animal loose. It seemed that he had made a terrible mistake, and could only abide by it now.

So he clung desperately to the back of the buckskin pony, which seemed able to display an astonishing array of tricks in the endeavor to dislodge its hated rider.

Frank heard the rapid pounding of hoofs not far away, and judged from this that the thief had a comrade who was making off as fast as his own horse could take him, leaving the luckless one to his fate.

Of course Frank could have brought his pony galloping toward him at any minute by a shrill whistle that Buckskin had been taught to respect; but he did not give it.

Things were moving along as well as anyone could want; and it looked as though that particular horse thief was bound to learn a lesson he would never forget.

As if not in the least at the end of his resources, the yellow pony now started on a new tack; and Bob's eye could hardly follow his swift and eccentric motions.

"Oh! there he goes flying, Frank!" the Kentucky lad suddenly gasped.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILENCE AT CHERRY BLOSSOM

BUCKSKIN had done it!

Some new and entirely unexpected trick had caught that clever and alarmed horse-thief napping. Torn from his hold, he found himself hurled over the head of the animal. Bob could hear the heavy thud as he struck the ground.

"Wow! that hurt some, I tell you, Frank?" he cried.

"Watch!" said the other, tersely.

There was about one chance in three that the man who had been so violently dislodged from his seat might have broken his neck. This fellow was either agile, or lucky enough to avoid such a happening. They saw him roll over several times, and then scramble to his knees.

The yellow pony gave a savage little squeal. Evidently Buckskin was not satisfied with having simply gotten rid of the unpleasant burden he had been carrying. The insult rankled deep, and hence he made for the spot where the now alarmed wretch was struggling to his feet, with

the desire to escape holding chief place in his mind.

There arose a series of yells and angry squeals and snorts. Buckskin could be seen taking furious nips at the man, who was trying to beat him off as well as he was able, and all the while yelling lustily for help.

Teeth and hoofs were giving the rascal all he could manage; and unless something soon came to pass to change matters, there was no telling what would happen to one venturesome horse thief who, as Bob expressed it, had "bitten off more than he could chew."

Frank was only waiting until he thought that the fellow had been sufficiently punished, when he expected to call the animal off. It was of course a question whether the enraged Buckskin would obey the call; and in case he refused, some other means must be taken to save the life of the fellow who was dodging, fighting, and howling with all his might.

"Frank, he'll kill him!" exclaimed Bob, who could hardly move, so deeply interested had he been by this strange happening that had taken place before them, as though the performance had been especially arranged for their benefit.

Apparently the other must have just come to the same conclusion.

"Here, hold my gun, Bob!" he remarked;

and when the transfer had been accomplished Frank put his fingers to his lips.

A shrill whistle pealed forth. Buckskin ceased his astonishing actions, and, with a whinny, started rapidly toward the spot where his master waited.

Once the yellow horse paused, and turned half around, as though strongly tempted to disobey, and go back for another dance with the horse thief; who, taking advantage of the opening, was limping away in a hurry.

Frank sent out another whistle; and this settled matters. Buckskin dared not disobey. Possibly he had in a measure satisfied his desire for revenge, and felt that he could afford to let the thief get away in a crippled condition.

"Good old chap!" said Frank, as he fondled the muzzle of the intelligent pony. "The rustler that gets you will have to be a better man than that one you just nibbled at!"

"Isn't he a wonder, though!" declared the admiring Bob. "I never would have believed that a horse could be so smart. And if you hadn't called him off, Frank, ten chances to one that fellow would have paid dearly for wanting to get our mounts."

"I rather think he has paid dearly for it, right now," laughed the other. "Just feel of these teeth, and tell me how you'd like to have

them taking hold of your shoulder. And if the pony managed to strike him a few times with his forefeet, they'd leave black and blue marks."

"Think they'll come back to try it on again?" asked Bob, though he himself never had the slightest belief of that.

Frank laughed scornfully.

"Say," he remarked. "I don't believe you could hire either of those fellows to take a look in at our little camp again, for love or money. That last one knows when he's got enough, anyhow. There he's found his own horse, and is kicking his heels into his sides. All he wants is to put a few miles between his own back and the little buckskin pony."

"What will we do now?" asked Bob.

"Oh! well, the first thing for me to do is to patch up my rope again, because, you see, that rustler sliced it off short. Then I'll stake the pony out. After that, me to crawl under the tent once more. It's a great thing to be able to sleep, while your horse keeps watch, Bob."

"Wonder what Domino thought of it all; and if he'll take pattern by it?" remarked the Kentucky boy. "You see, he's got a heap to learn, just like his master; but I have hopes that both of us will climb up out of the tenderfoot class right soon now."

"You're both getting there," laughed Frank,

as he walked over to where he would find the main part of his lariat.

This he managed to fix in a temporary manner that would do until he could get at it by daylight. And Buckskin acted quite as though proud of what he had done. He started to nibble at the grass near by; but Bob noticed, with more or less amusement, that the pony kept raising his head, and looking eagerly around, every half minute or so.

"He's hoping that another of the same kind will come, and try it on, Frank," Bob declared, with a merry laugh.

"Well, then, he's going to be badly disappointed," the other replied; "because those fellows are miles away by now, and still going licketty-split to get out of this section. It's some warm here for their breed. Even the horses are hungry to take a grab at 'em."

Accordingly both boys crawled under the little shelter, which Frank called a "dog tent," from having seen the regulars of the army fashion just such a rain-proof from a couple of rubber ponchos, under which two soldiers could keep the upper parts of their bodies from much of the moisture.

It took Bob a long time to get to sleep again. He was not used to such exciting sessions in the night; and, despite his determination to forget,

he tossed and turned for almost an hour before slumbering.

Frank, on the other hand, seemed to be asleep inside of five minutes after his head rested on the pillow made of his saddlebags. Nor did either of them show signs of uneasiness after Bob finally managed to conquer his wakefulness, until the dawn came and aroused Frank.

"Hope we can make the mine by to-night," remarked Bob, as they sat there a little later, enjoying their breakfast, which consisted of coffee and venison; and of course this fresh meat tasted all the sweeter to Bob because it had fallen to his gun.

'With anything like decent luck we ought to show up there," Frank observed. "And the closer we get to the Cherry Blossom district the more I find myself wondering what sort of trouble we're going to find ourselves up against."

"You must remember that I've never visited the mine, Frank, even if my father does hold a lot of the stock, and in conjunction with your family controls the operation of the works. Who's the foreman or superintendent in charge?"

"A man by the name of Gustave Riley is superintendent, and he's been in charge for a long time now," Frank replied.

"Your father trusts him, then?" pursued the other; for truth to tell, Bob expected some day

to become a lawyer, and he often showed signs of the profession even now, by investigating, questioning, and figuring out results.

"Well, he has all this while, and so far as I know Riley has played a straight game," Frank replied. "But dad told me to go slow, and be sure of my ground before I either trusted anyone, or suspected them of treachery. One thing seems sure, and that is the prospect of our finding that there's been some sort of rascality going on at the Cherry Blossom."

"The temptation is great, for one thing," suggested Bob.

"Yes," Frank went on, thoughtfully; "because of late the ore has been richer than ever, so we hear."

"And about that letter of warning, does your father have any suspicion who wrote it?" Bob asked.

"He thought of a number of people who might have sent it, but in the end admitted that he was all up in the air. You see, Bob, while it didn't go into details at all, it gave him to understand that the writer chanced to know there was some bad business on foot, which could only be nipped in the bud by prompt action. And it made dad so provoked, to think that his game leg must keep him at the ranch just when he was needed so badly in the other place."

"I only hope we can fill the bill with credit," sighed Bob.

"Well, we're going to do our level best," declared Frank, "and that's about all anybody could do. When I size matters up, I expect to understand just who are loyal, and who have gone over to the other side. Then there are going to be some wholesale discharges. I've got all the authority needed, and I won't be afraid to use it, either."

"I like to hear you talk like that, Frank," the other said.

"That's the only way, Bob. We were given to understand by the writer of the letter that was not signed by any name, that the Cherry Blossom needed an overhauling, unless we were willing to let unscrupulous parties profit at our expense. Just think how that leaves me guessing, will you?"

"But Frank, we'll know more in ten hours than we do now; and that's a heap of comfort," Bob managed to remark, confidently.

"It sure is," agreed the other.

"I saw you looking at that little packet the wrecked balloonist handed over," Bob went on to say. "Were you thinking of opening it ahead of time, Frank?"

"Oh, I guess not," replied the other. "How anxious you are to know what's in that envelope.

Perhaps, after all, it doesn't make a bit of difference to us. Mr. Jared Scott may only have been thinking about his own private affairs. How do we know but what he only wants us to communicate with some of his people, after a certain time has elapsed? Anyhow, it might as well lie there for six more days; but I see that you're going to give me little peace till then."

"Now you're rubbing it in on me," remonstrated Bob. "Fact is, I only feel curious because he looked so queerly at you when he heard your name. Strikes me that perhaps what's in the envelope might give us a clue to what's been going on over at the Cherry Blossom mine!"

Frank looked at him closely.

"That's only a guess on your part, Bob; you don't know anything to point that way, do you?" he demanded.

"No, can't say that I do," admitted the Kentucky lad.

"Then we'll just try to forget about it all for a while," was Frank's concluding decision; and Bob urged him no more.

They got off to a flying start soon after, and left behind them the high ridge that had come so near ending the career of the balloonist, Mr. Scott. During the morning the two horses kept pretty steadily at their work of putting the miles behind them. By two in the afternoon they had

reached the other chain of mountains, in the heart of which the famous gold mine lay.

Both boys began to show signs of anxiety, the nearer they drew to the scene of the trouble.

"We can make it all right, can't we, Frank?" asked Bob, as they found themselves surrounded on all sides by the wildest kind of rocky scenery, through which the trail zigzagged, with gigantic walls towering above their heads.

"No trouble about it," replied the other. "Fact is, Bob, right now I'm rather expecting to sight some of the boys above there. If the wind was right we could see the smoke from the stamp mill and the ore crusher. And that makes me remember how I heard the machinery working sooner than this the last time father brought me over to the Cherry Blossom."

"But you don't get the sound of the stamp mill or the crusher now?" asked Bob.

"It's all as silent as the grave," replied Frank, looking into the troubled eyes of his chum, with a set expression on his own face. "That would seem to mean the mine is shut down. But look up there; isn't that a man waving his hat to us right now?"

CHAPTER IX

A THREATENING STORM

"YOU'RE right, Frank," remarked Bob, after a searching look.

"I wonder if he expected us?" suggested the other, as they continued to advance up the trail that led through the canyon.

"Why, how under the sun could he?" exploded Bob. "We didn't send any word about our visit, you know. And besides, only for your father's lame leg, he would have made the journey himself."

"Oh! I know all that, Bob; but what I mean is this: You can see he is waving at us as if in friendly greeting. Now, at such at time as this, with a strike on at the mine, most likely, any stranger coming toward the Cherry Blossom would be looked on with suspicion by the men who were out."

"I reckon you're right," declared Bob, eager to know all that was passing in the active mind of his chum.

"Well, you can see that this party is beckoning as if he wanted to have us speed up our horses

still more on this sharp rise. He's anxious to have us join him. Can you guess why, Bob?"

"Say, d'ye suppose that he could have sent that queer note?" asked the other.

"Just what I've been thinking," replied Frank, nodding. "Look at it yourself, and see if it doesn't stand to reason."

"Well, so far as I can see, the fellow who sent that letter without a signature at the bottom would be the only one expecting somebody to come over here from Circle Ranch," Bob remarked.

"Sure. And as we get closer I'm beginning to think I know who he is," said Frank.

"Someone you met when over here before, I reckon."

"Yes, now I'm sure of it," the other answered, slowly. "His name is Sandy McCoy,and he's a young Scotchman who drifted to the mines a year or so back. I remember he told me he used to be an engineer on board a tramp steamer; but, getting tired of the sea, he started in to try mining."

"What did you think of him at the time?" asked Bob.

"As near as I can remember I was favorably impressed. He seemed to be a bluff fellow, and his eyes were as steady as a rock. On the whole, McCoy impressed me as a man to be trusted.

My father thought the same; because he said to me on the way home, that if he had to make a change of overseers for any reason, he believed that Scotchman was the chap for the job."

"That was a year or more ago, Frank?"

"Yes, fully that; before you came, you know," replied the prairie boy.

"But there has been no occasion for a change since then, eh?" Bob continued.

"Things seem to have just drifted along somehow," the other answered.

"Yet you heard grumblings every little while, didn't you?" Bob asked.

"We sure did; but anybody who has a big gang of men working, expects that sort of thing; and Gustave Riley seemed to know how to handle the miners. He's pretty much of a tyrant in some things; but then it takes a strong hand to manage thirty or forty rough characters, such as we employ."

"Well, it looks now pretty much as if the cork had popped out of the bottle. If the men have struck, the trouble is apt to be all the harder to manage because it has held off so long, Frank."

"I suppose that's right," remarked the other, gloomily.

"But see here," Bob continued, as he watched the actions of the lone sentinel who waited their

coming; "McCoy doesn't seem to be as much tickled as he was. Fact is, Frank, he looks a bit disappointed."

At that Frank laughed a little.

"Well," he said, "wouldn't you, if you had sent for help, and saw only a couple of boys coming in answer to your letter?"

"Then you think he expected your father to hurry over here with a dozen or twenty cowboys, to help put down the rebellion?" Bob demanded.

"It strikes me that's about the size of it," Frank assented. "But we're nearly up to him now, and must soon know the facts.'"

Bob was looking at the man who waited for them, and trying to read something of his character from his countenance. It was a typical Scotch face, with high cheekbones, freckles, a red mustache and beard, and blue eyes. Bob told himself that Sandy McCoy was an absolutely fearless kind of man, just the sort to knock around the world, and fill many positions that required courage and honesty, with credit.

"Hello! Sandy! how are you?" called Frank, as he and Bob drew close to the spot where the other stood.

Although McCoy had a decided "burr" to his voice, he seemed to speak decent English; and the first thing he said was:

"Where's your father, Frank?"

"Back home on the ranch, nursing a broken leg," replied the boy.

The man frowned, and seemed to gnaw at his stubby red mustache.

"I'm sorry for that," he remarked. "But I suppose he sent some of the men along with ye, Frank?"

Frank made a motion with his hand that included his companion.

"Here's the crowd, Sandy," he remarked; "just my chum, Bob Archer, and myself. His father is interested in the Cherry Blossom along with my dad. And we've come to see what the trouble is, and try to fix things up."

The other frowned, and then grinned, as he observed quaintly:

"I've heard how in one of the battles of your great war the Union forces were retreating in a panic, and received reinforcements in the shape of one man, and him General Phil Sheridan. But he coaxed his men to face the other way, and they won the victory. Perhaps this may be another Cedar Creek, Frank. But it looks like a tough proposition, boy; a tough puzzle for a lad to work out."

"Then there's a strike on, Sandy?" questioned Frank.

"Yes, it came at last, after long threatening," replied the other. "I was just on the point of

leaving the mine, to go back to the sea, when the storm began to show signs of breaking; so I changed my mind, and determined to see it through."

"Are all the men against us, Sandy?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"Well, not all," replied the other, with a humorous grin. "There's the foreman, Mr. Riley, the two water boys, one other man, and myself standing by ye, Frank."

The lad whistled, and looked at his chum.

"That looks pretty serious, eh, Bob?" he remarked. "And I reckon it'll be worse before it's much better. But there's always a way out of these things. The men have a grievance, and Riley is inclined to be a pig-headed man. Up to a certain point it's a good quality in a boss; but once in a while an overseer ought to know how to bend a little."

"Mr. Riley has done wonders here, Frank," remarked the Scotch engineer; "but as ye say he's lacking in diplomacy. I tried to advise him how this storm might have been headed off, but he snapped his fingers in my face. Then I thought your father ought to get on the ground to see for himself how matters were drifting."

"You wrote that note, then, Sandy?" asked Frank.

"Your're right, I did," replied the other,

shrugging his shoulders, as if to say that after all his trouble there did not seem to have been much come from it; as an addition of two half-grown boys would hardly help matters any.

"But you didn't say as much as you might; how was that, Sandy?"

"I'll tell you, Frank," replied the other. "You must understand that I feel for the men in this case. They have some cause for kicking. There are a number of things that ought to be changed; but Mr. Riley says no, and when he sets his face against a thing all heaven and earth can't make him back water."

"Well, perhaps there may be a way out of that, Sandy," remarked Frank. "From what you say I imagine you wanted my dad on the ground, believing that he would see what was wrong, and change it."

"He is a just man, and believes in the square deal. Yes," went on the other, "I wanted him to come, and reason with the men. They are feeling pretty bitter about it now, and it wouldn't take much to make them riot. The place is like a powder magazine, where a single spark will bring an explosion. Perhaps the very fact of your coming may bring that result, Frank!"

"Oh! I don't think so, Sandy," replied the boy, smilingly. "But come, let's head for the mine. I want to get at the bottom of this matter

as soon as I can. You've been watching the trail for an answer to the note you sent by that Indian?"

"For two days, now, Frank. And all the while the pot has kept simmering, getting hotter and hotter. The works are shut down because there's no man to run the stamps. And we never had as big a month as the last has been. I heard Mr. Riley say it beat the record."

He walked alongside Frank, talking as he went. Bob was keenly on the alert, knowing now that exciting events were going to happen before long.

In a little while they came to the brow of a small hill, and there, just before them, the boys could see the straggling building that represented one of the best paying gold mines in all Arizona. But no sign of smoke arose above the crusher or the stamp mill. Everywhere brooded a silence. It seemed like the ominous hush that often precedes the breaking of the storm.

Men could be seen, big brawny fellows in rough mining costume, lounging around in small knots, as though discussing the situation. Immediately attention seemed to be drawn toward the three moving figures, for hands were pointed toward them.

"Listen, would you, Frank?" said Bob, as loud cries began to be heard, while the men

started toward them, others coming out of shacks to join the crowd.

Bob could not keep from viewing the coming of the mob with more or less anxiety, for he saw weapons being brandished; and some of the shouts seemed to have an angry ring about them, as though the miners might welcome a chance to visit their wrath upon the son and heir of the principal owner of the Cherry Blossom mine!

CHAPTER X

STARTLING NEWS

FRANK saw that the situation was a grave one. The rough men of the mining camp naturally believed that their demands had been refused by the stern overseer, Mr. Riley, with the approval of Colonel Haywood. And their anger must, in that event, be more or less inflamed against the principal owner of the mine.

Such turbulent spirits, once they got started, would be capable of doing almost any terrible thing in order to satisfy their desire to get even.

Frank, however, knew that there was a way to manage even the most riotous crowd, provided the men had not gone beyond all restraint. A few half-way sensible spirits among the crowd could sway them the right way. Here was McCoy, who could be placed in that list; but the question was, were there any others?

"McCoy," he said to the engineer, as the miners came trooping forward, with ominous looks and cries, "back me up in anything that I'm going to say. And if you happen to know of several decent fellows among the lot, call on them

to stand by us when the pinch comes. I'm going to carry the day!"

The Scotchman looked admiringly at the boy, as he observed quickly:

"Now, I wouldn't be surprised if ye do, Frank. Anyhow, ye can depend on Sandy McCoy to stand by ye, come what may. And sometimes a soft word does more than all the threats in the wide world."

"I believe you, Sandy," replied Frank.

There was really little time for saying anything more. The surging mob had by now drawn close to them. Bob could see the ugly faces of the men, and he found himself wondering whether the fact of their carrying repeating rifles was going to help matters any.

Frank had made not the slightest move looking toward his gun. He sat in the saddle, and smiled, as he waved a hand toward the approaching miners.

"Hello! men," he called out.

A perfect howl went up, so that if Frank had intended saying anything more it would have been drowned in the racket. He sat there, still smiling, as though waiting for a chance to speak. A few of the miners were seen to be turning on their point, and several scowled at Sandy, as though trying to enforce silence. Above the clamor Bob heard one fellow say:

"Keep still, and let the boy have a chance!

Give him a square deal, and listen to what he's got to say afore ye howl him down. Silence!"

By slow degrees the noise began to subside. Some stopped shouting because they were influenced by these arguments, and a sense of fair play; others on account of a shortage of breath.

Then the last shout died out, and silence ensued.

"Men," said Frank, as firmly as he could, though doubtless his heart was beating like a trip-hammer under the excitement, "A good friend of yours, Sandy McCoy here, managed to send word to my father that there was some trouble at the mine, and asked him to come on to talk matters over with you, so that if anything was wrong it might be righted."

A few angry cries interrupted Frank at this point, and several scowled at Sandy, as though they suspected him of having sought to betray them.

"Wait! Listen to what else I have to say!" shouted Frank, holding up his hand.

Again those men who had asked for a fair hearing before influenced the others, and the unruly ones were hushed, so that the boy could continue.

"My father would have come himself to meet you, only he is suffering from a broken leg. He sent me instead, with my chum, whose father

also owns many shares in the good old Cherry Blossom mine. And, men, you can see for yourselves that we came to meet you as friends, because we are alone. There is no armed force back of us to threaten you. I have been sent to hear your grievances, and if they seem to be just, to settle the trouble here."

Again all sorts of cries broke out. Some of the men cheered; others, who feared that the chances for rioting might be reduced to nothing, gave evidence of their hostility. But Frank saw with satisfaction that by a large majority the crowd was coming to look on him in the light of a friend, and not a foe.

"Where is Mr. Riley?" he asked.

One of the men who had demanded a hearing for the boy stepped forward.

"He's barricaded himself in the engine house," he declared, grimly; "and says he'll shoot down every striker who tries to enter. I reckon the men were only waiting for night to come to rush his fort, and put everything to the torch!"

"Then it seems that I didn't get here any too soon," remarked Frank. "Listen to me, men; I've got full authority from my father to hear your complaints, and to offer you a remedy, no matter what it may cost the company. We want our men here at the Cherry Blossom to be satisfied!"

"Hear! hear!" arose many shouts, while a few hats were thrown into the air.

Some of the trouble makers tried to stir up the passion of the mob.

"He's only giving you taffy, men!" they called. "Don't believe what the kid says. All he wants is to hoodwink us, 'till the force from the ranch gets within striking distance. Then it'll be bullets instead of soft words!"

But these few were quickly made to understand they were in the minority, and that the crowd was ready to give Frank the chance he asked for.

"How about the boss—Riley?" shouted one.

"Yes, we never can work under him again, and there's no use talkin'," cried another.

"Wait!" said Frank. "Perhaps there may be a change here. Perhaps my father has another position on his ranch for Mr. Riley, and you may have a new foreman! How would Sandy McCoy suit you, men?" and he laid a hand on the shoulder of the brawny young engineer as he spoke.

At this the shouts that rang out were deafening. Doubtless Gustave Riley, entrenched behind the barricade he had erected at the engine house of the mining camp, was sorely puzzled by the strange sounds that came to his ears. He might have imagined that the mutineers were getting ready to use dynamite, in order to blow every

building in the place to pieces, to satisfy their desire for revenge.

Frank held up his hand to ask for further silence, and when he could be heard went on:

"Depend on it, men, everything is going to be made right. Stick by us, and there will be no cause for any further trouble. If you had sent a committee to my father before going to extremes all this might have been avoided, because he has the name of being a square man. Are we going to be friends, men?"

Like magic the temper of the mob had changed. Those rough men had come out filled with anger toward Colonel Haywood and his entire family. Now they had swung around to the other extreme. Nearly to a man they pressed forward to shake hands with the saddle boys. Even those who had appeared to be ugly toward Frank thought best to hide their real feelings and go with the tide.

"Now, what do you think, Sandy?" asked Frank, more than a little excited by the success that had attended his peace move.

"It's just wonderful how things have changed around, Frank," replied the other. "But would ye mind telling me whether your father knew what ye were going to do about makin' a change here in overseers?"

"Oh! we talked it all over, Sandy," replied

the boy. "He's been convinced that a change would do good here, and that Riley was too severe with the men. So he is going to offer him a fine position on the ranch, for he needs just such a man there. I hope Riley takes the job, for he is all right, if a little too pig-headed."

"And did your father mention my name, Frank?" asked the pleased engineer."

"You may be sure he did the same, Sandy. Long ago he had his eye on you, and told me you were going to get this billet if ever there was a change made. But come, I'd like to talk with the overseer. Suppose we go to the engine house, Sandy."

Frank and Bob jumped to the ground, leaving their horses to be looked after by some of the men, who were only too eager to curry favor this way. Accompanied by McCoy, and followed by two dozen of the miners, they pushed through the camp, heading toward the buildings.

A head was thrust out of an opening, and a voice hailed them.

"Keep back, every man of you! If a single one crosses that dead line, I shoot!"

"Hold on, Mr. Riley," the miner's son called. "Look again, and you'll see that it's Frank Haywood."

"Why, so it is, for a fact!" cried the prisoner of the engine house, in a surprised tone. "What-

ever brings you here, and right now when there's going to be all sorts of trouble breaking loose?"

"That's where you're wrong, Mr. Riley," answered Frank, as, accompanied by his two companions, he continued to advance. "I've been sent here by dad, whose broken leg prevented his coming, to look into matters, and settle the same to the satisfaction of the men."

"Does that mean your father is going to give in to them?" demanded the obstinate foreman. "If that's the case just count me out. I resign on the spot. I'd fight the whole camp before I'd knuckle down to a lot of rascals."

"All right, Mr. Riley; your resignation is accepted," said Frank, as the door opened, and he stepped into the building. "My father has seen for some time that you and the men here had bad blood between you; and he wants you on the ranch, if you will come, to fill a position that pays better than being overseer at the mine."

Riley, who was certainly a fighter, looked uncertain.

"Well," said he, "it sure does make me tired to think these plotters are going to soft-soap Colonole Haywood; but perhaps, after all, its best. They would burn the buildings down, and cause a big loss. But see here, Frank, who will be boss after I'm gone?"

Frank turned and looked smilingly at McCoy.

"Dad has had this gentleman in his eye for some little time; how do you think he'd fill the bill, Mr. Riley?" he asked.

The deposed overseer waited for a minute, as though trying to conquer the natural feeling of bitterness that almost overwhelmed him. Then he impulsively thrust out his hand to Sandy.

"You couldn't do better," he said. "I honestly believe Sandy McCoy will make good. Besides, I reckon he's got the confidence of the men, and that's what I was never able to get."

"Then it's all right, Mr. Riley," Frank remarked. "As you find the time, please put the new overseer in touch with all the affairs of the company that he ought to know. And when that is done my father will want to see you at the ranch."

"Very good, Frank," said Mr. Riley. "You got here just in the nick of time. From the way things were going I'm afraid there'd have been warm work before another sun came up. I had six guns back of me, with one man and two boys to help. But now we'll try and forget all about the trouble. I suppose you'll have the men get a committee together, formulate their demands, and then pass on 'em?"

"That's about what I expect to do, Mr. Riley," remarked Frank, gleefully. "And since they already trust me, I expect to have little trouble in

patching up a lasting truce with the men of the Cherry Blossom mine. Why, perhaps in a day or two, my chum and I will be taking the back trail to Circle Ranch."

The deposed foreman looked around him cautiously, and Bob was struck by something of mystery in his actions. Then he leaned forward, and plucked Frank by the sleeve.

"It might be you will not be leaving for home as soon as you thought, Frank," he said, suggestively.

"Why not, Mr. Riley; what's to hinder us?" asked the boy, earnestly.

"Why, I'm thinking that perhaps you'd feel inclined to stay a little while longer, and see if you couldn't recover it," Mr. Riley remarked.

"Recover what?" Frank asked.

"The treasure that has been stolen from the strong room in the office of Cherry Blossom mine," came the astonishing reply.

"Treasure!" echoed Frank. "Do you mean to tell me there has been a robbery as well as a strike here?"

"Just that, Frank," replied the other, moodily. "All the clean-up of the month, some two hundred pounds of gold, has been stolen, and the robbers are by now far away from here!"

CHAPTER XI

TRAILING THE TREASURE THIEVES

"THIS is stunning news you are giving me, Mr. Riley!" exclaimed Frank.

"I reckon it is, Frank," replied the ex-foreman. "And the worst of it is, that I was never able to keep on the track of the three thieves; because these strikers ran me into the engine house here, and threatened me with a rope if I tried to show up again. So I've been stalled for hours; and all the time those robbers have been getting farther and farther away."

"Do you know when it happened?" asked Bob, his lawyer nature coming to the front when the emergency arose.

"Two nights ago, I've got good reason to believe, from the signs," answered Mr. Riley.

"But you didn't know it right away; is that it?" asked Frank.

"I had so much to look after in other quarters that I didn't take a peep in at the strong room until this morning. Then I was surprised to find that the place had been cleaned out. There was

about two hundred pounds of gold in three strong sacks, and it was gone! I reckon it would add up to something like fifty thousand dollars' worth, Frank!"

The late overseer looked haggard and glum. He acted as though he had had a hard time of late, with everything against him.

"Do you suspect any of the men employed here?" asked Bob.

"I did, but changed my mind. There isn't a man missing, that I can see. I found the tracks of the three robbers, and the marks don't tally with the boot-prints of any miner. They were made by men from civilization, who wore shoes of an up-to-date pattern."

"But, Mr. Riley, how do you know all this, when we found you shut up here in the engine house?" asked Frank.

"I hunted for the tracks after discovering the robbery," replied the other, moodily. "After I had found them I trailed the three thieves half a mile out of camp. Then, anxious to take up the job in the right way, I came back to get some guns and men. That was when the mob met me, and chased me in here, where I had prepared for a long siege."

"Then it's your opinion, is it, that three strangers broke into the strong room, and rifled it; after which they hurried away?" asked Bob.

"That about covers the ground; and as they have had a big start I'm afraid its goin' to be a hard job overhaulin' 'em," replied Mr. Riley.

"Perhaps it may," said Frank, as he looked serious; "but two hundred pounds is some weight to carry any distance; and we have good horses, if they happen to take to the plain."

Here was a new dilemma. He had expected that with the strike well settled, peace would descend on Cherry Blossom mine; and that presently he and Bob might gallop back home with cheering news.

But it would be another thing to find himself compelled to tell his father that some clever robbers had broken open the strong room, where the proceeds of hte run at the stamp mills were kept behind lock and key, making a safe get-away.

"Bob, you hear what's been going on; how are we going to stand for it?" Frank asked, turning to his chum.

"By doing our level best to get that treasure back!" was the prompt response.

"You hear, Mr, Riley," continued Frank. "Suppose, then, you turn things over to the new superintendent right now, and come along with us."

"I'm just wild to get started, Frank," declared Mr. Riley. "Because, you see, I feel that I'm partly to blame for this loss. But, if it hadn't

been for the upset condition of things around that time, make up your mind it could never have happened. My attention was taken up by the actions of the men. Sometimes I find myself wondering whether it just happened that way; or if the strike wasn't engineered to cover the crime of robbery."

"The chances are," said Bob, deliberately, "that if it was done by outside parties, they saw how you were occupied by the actions of the men in striking, and took advantage of the opportunity."

"Please take us to where the rifled strong room is, Mr. Riley," said Frank.

"Will you let the men know?" asked the former superintendent.

"You haven't told them, then?" queried Frank

"Not a soul knows anything about it," came the reply. "I was expecting to pick out a couple of fellows, and make a start after the thieves, when I bucked up against a snag, and they ran me in here. But I didn't see Sandy, and there was no one else to take into my confidence."

"Well, I think the men ought to know," Frank declared. "They'll understand that I'm ready to take them into the game; and perhaps some one may have seen the rascals, and can give us an idea about what they looked like. Come out,

Mr. Riley, and let the crowd understand that you don't suspect any of them."

Some dark looks were cast toward the deposed overseer; but at least the men entertained a healthy respect for his muscular prowess; and nobody ever questioned his bravery. So no violence was offered him. And as soon as Frank told of the great robbery, everything else was immediately forgotten.

It happened, however, that no one among them was able to advance a promising clue in connection with the robbers. So carefully had these worthies worked that they had not been seen by a single miner, though men had been moving about on the entire night in question, sleep being out of the question at the Cherry Blossom.

"I expect to take along Mr. Riley and one other man, selected by him as a good trailer," said Frank, when the crowd gathered around him, clamoring for a chance to do something to show their altered feelings toward the Haywood family.

"How about us, then; don't we go along, too?" called one husky fellow.

"You will stay here, and get back on your job," Frank remarked. "The new superintendent will settle all troubles until I can come back. The Cherry Blossom mine has been idle for two days. You must work all the harder, men, to

make up for lost time. And we're going to get that gold back, if anybody can; understand that!"

Shouts greeted these words. Those rough men could appreciate nerve, and to hear the son of their employer talk so boldly pleased them greatly.

"Three cheers for Frank Haywood!" called one big miner.

It thrilled the boy to hear those lusty shouts. He felt that somehow he had succeeded in winning a complete victory over these turbulent spirits. Where the obstinacy of Mr. Riley had failed, Frank's methods had carried the day. They were all his friends now, and just as ready to build up as they had recently been to destroy. The spirit of a mob changes like the weather, and is just as fickle.

Mr. Riley led the two boys to the office. Sandy McCoy lingered to address the crowd, and try to get them to return immediately to work.

"Here's the building, Frank," remarked the former superintendent, as they arrived in front of a low, squat house, built of stone for the most part, and particularly strong.

"Now come back with me and I will show you just how these smart thieves tunneled under the stone wall, and managed to come up inside the strong room, without having the trouble to break the lock on the door. Every time I was in the

office I saw that padlock in place, and never dreamed the bank could be empty back of that oak door."

As he said this, Mr. Riley led the way to the rear of the building. Here it happened that there grew more or less scrub, partly concealing the foundation of the wall.

Parting this, Mr. Riley showed the boys what looked like the big burrow of a rabbit, or a hedgehog, running down at an angle of forty-five degrees, so as to pass under the stones forming the foundation of the wall.

"You can see how slick a game they set up," remarked the man, gritting his teeth with anger and chagrin. "Perhaps they worked at this thing more than one night, and all the time I never tumbled to it. When the tunnel was finished, one of 'em just crawled through, passed out the three sacks of gold; and then they vamoosed."

"Let's look inside the house, remarked Frank. "Then we'll try to arrange for following the robbers."

When they entered the strong room it was to find it empty, just as the former superintendent had declared was the case. No sign of any treasure could be seen.

"Is this your hat?" asked Bob, picking the article in question up.

"Never saw it before," answered Mr. Riley.

"Then it must have belonged to one of the thieves!" suggested the boy, examining the head gear.

"Just as likely as not," agreed the deposed superintendent. "But that isn't goin' to help us find out who they are, and where they can be run across right now."

"Perhaps not," observed Bob, as he again examined the soft, felt hat, which was of a gray color, with a black band around the crown, the whole forming a combination that would have been fairly noticeable.

"There's nearly an hour before dark sets in," Frank observed, "and perhaps we might get a start. Suppose you hunt up the best all-round trailer in the camp, Mr. Riley, and fetch him along. Have you horses that could be used? We might want to travel some distance, especially if the trail heads toward the Mexican border."

"All right, Frank," replied the other, seeming to brighten up at the chance for doing something. "I'll be back in a little while, and we'll make a start. If you want to look for yourself, hike over to where you see the broken rocks in a heap. Right alongside you'll find the tracks of the robbers. We'll fetch all the horses along."

So Mr. Riley hurried away to carry out his part of the plan; while Frank and Bob walked over to where the rocks lay, looking very much

like a grave, in the valley where the Cherry Blossom mine was being worked.

"Here they are, just as he said," remarked Frank, as he dropped down on hands and knees, the better to examine the tracks left by the marauders.

"What do you make of them?" asked Bob, presently, as his chum arose again.

"Oh! just as Mr. Riley said; there were three in the bunch," Frank answered.

"How about their shoes—can you tell whether they're smaller than the boots worn by the miners?" Bob continued, as if desirous of making sure.

"Yes, that's a fact, Bob."

"Then it stands to reason he was right when he said the robbery had been done by strangers here," the Kentucky boy went on to say.

"Looks that way," Frank agreed. "Perhaps they came from Phoenix; or even far-away Los Angeles. The story of the rich Cherry Blossom has traveled far and wide; and I suppose these three rascals made up a plot to get away with the month's run."

"And they did it, all right," remarked Bob. "Think you can follow the tracks, Frank?"

"The easiest thing ever," came the reply. "Besides, right here Mr. Riley left his big footprints, so a blind man could keep on the trail.

Come on, we might as well be moving. Plenty of time later on for a rest, when perhaps the dark will keep us from work."

Frank led off as he spoke. He had learned his lesson fairly well, from having lived among cowboys for years. Besides, old Hank Coombs, the veteran cowman of the Circle Ranch, had often showed the son of his employer many tricks in connection with woodcraft.

A short time later Frank turned again to speak to his comrade.

"Here's as far as Riley went," he observed. "See, he swung off at this point, just as he told us, meaning to get several men with guns to go along with him. But instead he ran up against the mob rioters, who forced him to barricade himself in the engine house."

"That was some hours ago," remarked Bob.

"Yes, that's true," Frank replied.

"Lots of things could happen in that time, Frank."

"Sure they could; but all the same there's only one thing we've got to do, and that is to keep right on this trail till it brings us up with the three thieves; or else we'll lose it in the mountains."

He again started along the tracks of the fugitives. Bob followed close behind, where he could speak when the humor seized him, and ask questions; for Bob knew he had much to learn about

the wonderful things a prairie boy knows by heart; and he never hesitated to make inquiries.

"How old did Mr. Riley say this trail was, Frank?" he presently asked.

"Nearly two days; but it's nearly as plain as when it was made; and if he can fetch along a man worth shucks, we oughtn't to have any trouble about following."

"Well, here comes our friend, Mr. Riley, and he's got a bunch of horses along; besides another man," Bob remarked; as he looked back over his shoulder.

"That's good," said Frank, though he did not cease his efforts to follow the plainly-marked trail.

Presently they were overtaken by Mr. Riley and the other man, whom he introduced as Sim Garrison, once something of a noted character among the Indians, with whom he had lived many years, and who, the former superintendent declared, had no superior as a trailer.

"All we've got to do, boys," said Mr. Riley, who was mounted on a big and powerful bay horse, and seemed to be heavily armed, "is to plug along behind Sim, leaving him to do the work. If the time should ever come when we could overtake those three thieves, then we'll have a chance to show our hands."

And that was what they started out to do, as the sun sank lower and lower in the glowing west.

Through the basin or valley in which the famous mine lay, they pushed.

"Seems to know his business, all right," commented Bob, as he ranged alongside his chum; the two horses had been relieved of much of their loads so that they felt fresher than when the boys arrived, a short time before.

"I reckon yes," replied Frank, who had been observing Sim Garrison closely for some little time. "And these experienced trailers can even follow the track of a man on the darkest night, you know."

"You mean by the use of a lantern or a torch?" remarked Bob. "I can well believe that, because already I've seen you do the same stunt. These fellows may get away from us, Frank, but they've got to hustle to do it, let me tell you."

"That's what, Bob. But look at Sim halting now."

"Perhaps he's run up against a snag already. You've often told me there are lots of ways to hide a trail; perhaps these sharp thieves have done that same thing!" Bob ventured to remark.

"But all the same I don't believe so," Frank went on, as he urged the led horse which the trailer was to ride later on, to increase its speed from a walk to a little canter.

"How's that?" demanded his chum, quickly, with the air of "if you know all that just commu-

nicate a little of it to a tenderfoot like me, can't you, Frank?"

"Oh! well, just because he doesn't happen to look disappointed, for one thing. He's found something that surprised him more or less. But we'll soon know. Bob."

CHAPTER XII

THE PATH ALONG THE CLIFF

A long, loud whistle sounded.

"What d'ye suppose that's for?" asked Bob, "It came from the mine, didn't it?"

"To be sure," replied Frank. "And I reckon it's a call for the men to get busy."

"That would mean the new overseer is starting things again?" continued Bob.

"Well, it looks that way, as sure as anything," his chum went on, with an air of satisfaction. "So we can take it for granted that the men believe things are going to come out all right; which they will, if I can make 'em."

By this time they had arrived close to the spot where the trailer stood awaiting their arrival. As Mr. Riley had kept closer to Sim than had either of the boys, he was even then on the ground, looking down at something to which his attention had evidently been directed by the other.

Frank threw himself down, giving his chum the horses to care for.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Why, it seems as if another trail, much fresher, has crossed the one we were following," replied the former overseer.

"Why does that bother him?" asked Frank.

"Just because Sim, here, declares the tracks are so much like some of those made by the men we're chasing after, that he believes they must be the same parties!" Mr. Riley answered.

"Oh! that changes the case a heap," remarked Frank. "Let me take a look and see if I can tell as much."

A minute later he got up off his knees.

"How?" asked Bob, Indian fashion.

"Sim is dead right," replied Frank.

"Same lot, then, Frank?"

"Not a little doubt about it," replied the other.

"Three men, and all wearing store shoes, with narrow soles, eh?" Bob continued.

Frank shot a look toward the experienced trailer. Then he held up two fingers of his right hand, with a question in his eyes. Sim nodded his head in the affirmative.

"There seems to be only two of them now," remarked Frank.

"'One missing, eh?" Bob kept on. "What d'ye suppose they could have done with him?"

"What do *you* think, Mr. Riley?" and Frank turned on the ex-superintendent.

"Well, said he reflectively, "I've seen many

of these fellows in my days, boys, and I reckon I know about how they pan out. There was just three in the bunch to start. That was evidently one too many. It made the shares of the swag too small. What happens? Oh! they just lost the third man, that's all."

"What! Do you mean to say they disposed of him when he wasn't looking, and then ran away with the treasure?" demanded Bob.

"Oh! I don't know," resumed the ex-overseer. "Perhaps it wa'n't so bad as that. They might have only tumbled him down into some hole, and left him there to climb out, or stay in. Then again, perhaps they just held him up, took his guns away, and then walked off with his sack."

"That sounds as if it might be the way it happened," remarked Bob, who could, in imagination, almost see the treachery of the two robbers being carried out; and, while he did not know why it should be so, somehow his sympathy seemed to go out to the third man who was being so badly treated by his mates.

"But you said the gold must have weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds, didn't you, Mr. Riley?" asked Frank.

"Not far from that, Frank, and valued at nearly fifty thousand dollars, counting it at about twenty dollars to the ounce, and twelve ounces to the pound," replied the other.

"That looks queer," mused Frank.

"In what way?" asked Bob, quickly; while both the others listened eagerly.

"Well, you told me the gold was in three sacks, didn't you?" Frank went on.

"Yes, it was, Frank."

"Then if these two fellows were carrying it all, one of them would have to tote two of the sacks, wouldn't he?" the boy demanded.

"It stands to reason he would, because they couldn't divide the third bag," Riley admitted, readily enough.

"All right. Now when a fellow staggers along carrying one hundred and thirty pounds on his back he would be sure to sink into the soft ground much deeper than when he only had half that much, eh, Mr. Riley?" Frank continued.

The man gave utterance to an exclamation; while the experienced trailer dropped once more to the ground.

"The boy's right, Riley," the last individual exclaimed, almost immediately. "The cross tracks are as fresh as if made only a little time ago; while the others are old, but if anything, the new ones are not as deep as the first!"

"What would you take from that?" demanded Bob.

"Perhaps they hid the gold!" suggested Mr. Riley.

"Looks that way; though for the life of me I can't understand why they've been a-hangin' around here all this time, takin' chances," Sim Garrison said.

"Then what ought we do?" remarked the former superintendent, turning to Frank. "Keep right along after the two thieves; or turn back on this new trail, and try to find where they hid the stuff?"

Frank had to think fast just then. A mistake was apt to prove costly.

"We can always come back to this point, and take up the back trail," he said; "but the thieves will be getting farther and farther away all the while. So I say, let's start after them."

"I cover that way," remarked Sim. "Seems like no fellers'd ever come up into this country without mounts; and I just reckon that these two are headin' for where the hosses are hid."

"Then the sooner we start, the better chance we will have to get sight of them," Frank remarked.

Sim took the hint. Bending down he hastened along. So accustomed were his eyes to picking out signs invisible to a greenhorn like Bob, that he was able to run pretty much all the time; and the horses had to keep up a little canter to hold their own.

"I wonder whether we will really get a glimpse

of them before night sets in?" Bob remarked, as he rode along close to his chum.

"Nobody can tell," came the reply; "but it wouldn't surprise me if we did. What I'm wondering at is why these fellows hung around all this time, when they must have known there would be a hunt as soon as the robbery was discovered."

"That *is* queer, come to think of it," Bob agreed. "And you don't happen to think of any explanation, eh?"

"That's what I don't," Frank admitted, shaking his head. "Of course I could give a dozen guesses; but all of 'em would be far from the mark. Still, there must be a reason, and a mighty good one, too. A whole lot might hinge on a little thing."

"Do you suppose they just happened to cross their old trail?" Bob asked.

"No doubt of it," came the ready reply; "and see how accident helps a fellow, sometimes. Only for that we'd have been forced to follow them over all the ground they've covered since the robbery took place two nights ago. That helped us along fine."

"And that's how hard luck sometimes upsets all the calculations of the sharpest of rascals," remarked Bob.

"Seems like it," observed Frank, and immediately afterwards he cried out: "Look up yon-

der; what's that moving there? I'm nearly sure I saw a horse pass that little gap, Mr. Riley."

"That's what you did, Frank!" exclaimed Sim, the trailer; "and there goes a second one. Off we go, fellers, and it's a stern chase now!"

"Are you sure they're the men we're looking for?" gasped Bob, as Domino sprang after the horses ridden by the ex-superintendent and Sim.

"Everything seems to point that way," replied Frank. "They're running as if scared at sight of us; and that's almost a sure evidence of guilt. Then, as near as I can tell, the two men seem to be anything but miners. I reckon we've put up our game, all right. And already we're pulling up on 'em some."

"You're right," declared Bob. "They happen to have poor mounts. Why, I can see one of the horses limp even from here. But, Frank, isn't it likely those fellows will put up a stiff fight before surrendering to us?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did, Bob. Now look at them turn that bend, and disappear from sight. Seems as if the trail runs along a path that's fastened to the face of the cliff; doesn't it? A slip would mean trouble for man and horses. But if *they* can make it, *we* ought to be able to."

"Where they lead we follow!" cried Bob, much excited by this time.

They were soon sweeping along close to the dangerous place in the trail. Sim was in the van, for since he had been installed in the place of honor as tracker, it was only right he should assume the lead. Next to him came Mr. Riley; then Frank, while Bob brought up in the rear.

"Say, Frank, did you happen to see the sacks of treasure hung on the animals?" asked the Kentucky boy.

"Not that I knew of; did you?" demanded the other quickly.

"Well, now, I didn't, that's a fact," replied Bob. "But then, they might have them concealed. They would expect to meet lots of white people on the road after they had gone a certain distance. There, Sim is turning the bend in the path along the face of the cliff. Ugh! don't look down, or you'll get dizzy. It's awful deep right here. One little slip, and where would you land?"

Hardly had Bob made this suggestive remark, calculated to give Frank a shiver, than their ears were saluted by a heavy explosion right ahead around the bend.

A portion of the cliff path seemed to separate itself from the rock wall, and go plunging down; and Sim, together with his horse, was carried over the edge with it!

CHAPTER XIII

SIM HAS A CLOSE CALL

"OH!" cried Bob, who had just caught a fleeting glimpse of man and rider tottering on the verge of the broken cliff trail, which had evidently been blown away by the explosion of a dynamite cartridge placed there for that purpose by the retreating fugitives, in order to cut off pursuit.

Frank saw more.

He knew that Sim, being an old cowman, and accustomed to leaving his saddle in a hurry when some peril threatened, had shaken his feet free from the stirrups. One wild spring, and the trail-finder managed to clutch hold of the rock, though his horse went plunging down into space.

Frank was out of his own saddle in a second. Another, and he had snatched the rope which he always carried, to be used as a lariat when chasing steers, or a means of keeping his horse from straying too far away at night.

Buckskin seemed to know that this was no time for any prancing. He behaved himself splendidly. On the other hand the big bay of the former superintendent gave evidence of fright,

jumping up, apparently desirous of trying to turn around, an impossible feat on that narrow shelf, or at least one accompanied by extreme hazard.

Frank knew then that it all depended on him, if Sim was to be rescued. He could see that the man was still dangling there, his only hold being the tip of the rock. At any moment his grip might loosen, and he would be hurled down after his horse, that lay motionless more than eighty feet below.

Frank watched his chance, and managed to slip past the rearing steed of Mr. Riley, without being struck by the flying hoofs.

Now he was close above Sim. One glance told the boy that he could not hope to bend down and catch hold of the man. His rope would have to be used; but just how he could place the loop was a question, with both arms of the man held aloft.

Sim solved the puzzle for him by elevating his legs, bent at the knee. Instantly Frank knew what he wanted him to do—drop the loop of his lariat over both legs, and then draw taut. In case Sim's grip was broken, while he might hang head downward, at least he could not take that terrible plunge.

Frank was a pretty good hand at throwing the rope, and those upturned legs offered so easy a mark that he could hardly fail to drop the noose over them at the first attempt.

When this had been accomplished his next movement was to whip the rope around a point of rock that jutted out close at hand. It was the same action that a cowboy would bring into play in snubbing a steer he had roped.

"Great!" cried Bob, who had watched all this with eyes that seemed to be fairly bulging from his head.

But there was still more to be done. Sim had managed to secure only a makeshift grip on the rock. His hands were slipping by degrees, though he had held on with desperation until he felt the rope drawn taut, and knew that Frank had made fast above.

Then he let go!

Bob gave an involuntary cry. He could not help it, even while understanding how this emergency had been provided against by his chum who used the rope.

"Somebody give me a hand!" called Frank, who had hold of the lariat close to where it had been several times wound around the projecting stone.

Bob dropped out of the saddle. Really, considering the fact that this sort of business was quite new to him, the black Kentucky horse was acting very well. Perhaps Domino took pattern from his companion, Buckskin. At any rate he did not prance wildly, after the fashion of the

big bay ridden by Mr. Riley; and Bob afterwards declared that he was quite proud of his mount.

Of course, once the two stout boys b nt to the task, they quickly drew the dangling Sim to the top of the wall, so that he could scramble on to the cliff path. Outside of being red in the face, from his having hung head downward, the ex-cowboy seemed none the worse for his experience.

But he was in a pretty heated condition mentally. To his mind that trick played by the two fugitives was the meanest thing ever heard of. Frank, of course, understood that the main object had been to destroy the cliff path, so as to cut off pursuit. That the explosion had been delayed a little longer than calculated on, was only an accident.

"I'm out of the game by it, anyhow!" grumbled Sim, as he crawled to the edge, to look down to where his late mount lay.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Bob, who once more had hold of the bridle of his horse, though he did not try to mount.

"The game didn't work, fellers," called Sim, who had changed his position, and was now examining the break in the path. "Looky here, there's enough footing left to get the hosses over, with a little care."

"That's right," remarked Mr. Riley, now also

dismounted, his big bay acting more tractably. "I reckon I can coax old Brickdust here to amble over. Come along, you skittish rascal, and show your good points."

Bob fairly held his breath as he watched how the former superintendent of the mine first stepped along the narrow ledge himself, and, holding the bridle, urged his steed to do the same.

One little misstep, and nothing could keep the horse from toppling over the ridge, just as Sim's unlucky mount had done. There was some snorting on the part of the big bay; but the animal seemed to appreciate the situation. Keeping as close to the face of the wall of stone as possible, and stepping carefully, Brickdust crossed the broken spot in the cliff trail.

"Sim, you help Bob get his mount over," said Frank, as he started to follow the example of Mr. Riley.

Of course Buckskin gave no trouble. He had been brought up amid such wild surroundings, and was as sure-footed as a mountain goat. Besides, doubtless during the innumerable gallops taken by Frank, they had frequently been compelled to navigate ticklish paths, where a slip meant disaster; so the horse was used to such things.

"Let me have the bridle; and you go ahead,

Bob, so your hoss kin keep his eye on ye," said Sim.

Bob noticed how the other failed to wind the bridle around his wrist. On the contrary Sim held it in such a way that he could let go instantly, should Domino act frightened while in the danger zone. Nor could the ex-cowboy be blamed for such caution. One experience was quite enough for him. And a drop into that yawning gulf was almost sure death.

Domino proved a sensible horse. He stepped carefully, and snorted as though appreciating the situation; but he managed to get over to the wider ledge without once slipping.

Bob breathed easy again. Had anything happened he must have felt heavy-hearted for a long time; because the black animal seemed to enter into his very life, such were the warm associations between them.

"Sorry to lose you, Sim!" exclaimed Mr. Riley, as he once more climbed into his saddle, ready to take up the pursuit.

"And I'm all knocked to pieces by my misfortune!" grumbled the trailer. "Hope ye have good luck, Mr. Riley, an' fetch the stuff back again. So-long, boys!"

They were off again, leaving Sim there on the shelf, waving them good-by.

Both Frank and Mr. Riley were on the lookout

for signs of those whom they were chasing. Even Bob strained his eyes to catch some glimpses of them, though he hardly knew in which direction to look.

"Have you seen anything of them, Frank?" he asked, presently, when he urged his horse alongside Buckskin.

"Sure," came the confident reply. "Several times I've caught sight of the pair. They're whipping up to beat the band; but we seem to be gaining all the while."

"Must have surprised 'em to see us, after they played such a clever game to cut off all pursuit, eh?" went on his chum.

"That's a fact, Bob; they expected that dynamite to smash the whole trail, and leave a gap no horse could pass over. But it failed to do its work, even if Sim did lose his horse, and come near going down himself."

"Whew! but it was some ticklish when that explosion came," remarked Bob, with a little whistle. "I'll never forget it as long as I live. I thought Domino would sure stand up on his hind legs, and try to wheel around. That would have wound me up, and both of us must have gone over the edge. Excuse me from chasing after a couple of treasure thieves along a path that is hung in the air."

"Well, we're nearly out of this end of the

mountains now, and there they go off on the level plain," Frank remarked, pointing with his right hand.

"It's going to be a stern chase then," declared his chum.

"Looks like it, Bob; but the one thing I don't like is that night will be down on us in short order now. We don't have long twilight in the Southwest, you know. And while there ought to be a pretty fair moon, I notice that clouds are swarming up over yonder, so that in less than half an hour its going to be some dark."

Bob looked up at the sky, then toward the distant fugitives, and shook his head, as if the situation did not exactly appeal to him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LONG CHASE

"FRANK, you don't think it's going to storm, do you?" asked Bob, a little later.

At that the other laughed aloud.

"Oh! I see what's on your mind, old fellow!" he exclaimed. "You're thinking of what happened to us when we were lost on Thunder Mountain, and a cloudburst came near catching us in the canyon. But no such danger here, Bob."

"Well, I'm glad of that, anyhow," retorted the other; "because I'm not extra fond of storms myself; and down here in this queer country they carry on in a way I'm not used to. But suppose dark comes down on us, as you say it's bound to do soon, and we're still a long distance behind those fellows—what then?"

"Mr. Riley will have to decide," returned Frank, willing that an older head than his should take the lead in such an emergency.

"But if we don't see the rascals, how can we keep after 'em?" persisted Bob.

"Oh! well, we might get a general idea of how

they were heading all the time, and keep pushing on, in hopes we would overtake 'em sooner or later. The chances would be slim, of course; but anything is better than lying idle. But wait till Mr. Riley makes up his mind."

As they rode on, the sun vanished from view. Night would come upon them more quickly than usual on account of those gathering clouds.

"We seem to keep gaining all the time, Frank," remarked Bob, after another fifteen minutes had passed.

"That's a fact," replied his chum; "and it makes me feel bad because I don't happen to be an up-to-date Joshua, so I could hold the sun still for an hour more, up in the Western sky. Given that much time, and we'd overhaul 'em, dead sure."

"I reckon we would," declared Bob, "because even a greenhorn like myself can see how one of those horses has a little limp; and the other is forced to hold back to keep him company. Well, it's been a lively chase, anyway, even if we don't overtake the fellows. We're given 'em a bad scare, and that's one consolation."

They kept pushing on steadily over the plains as the minutes crept past.

"It's a great pity our horses were stale after an all day ride, when this thing started out," remarked Bob.

"That's what I was saying to myself a little bit ago," Frank replied.

"If it had been morning, now," the Kentucky boy sighed, "with Buckskin and Domino fresh, wouldn't we just eat up the ground, though, and climb after those fellows? Why, we'd leave that big bay of Mr. Riley's out of sight."

"Sure thing," added Frank; "why, even as it is, we hold our own with the bay; and he was fresh to start with."

This gave Bob more or less consolation. Anything that stamped his pet as a horse of unusual quality, was sure to give him pleasure.

"I've lost 'em, Frank!" he called out, some little time later, after he had been straining his eyes to the limit in the endeavor to make out the moving figures ahead.

"And *I* expect to very soon now," his chum answered, bending forward in the saddle while speaking, as though he dared not remove his gaze for even one second from the dimly-seen objects beyond.

"Gone!" called Mr. Riley, still ahead of the others.

None of them drew up. Frank believed he could still see the fugitives. One of them happened to be mounted on a gray horse, and this moving object held in view even after the darker animal had been blotted out.

Presently, however, even Frank was compelled to admit that he could not positively say he could see anything.

He and Mr. Riley exchanged occasional remarks concerning the course. Both of them had taken their bearings by means of the heavens. The rising wind was also a guide, for it struck them full in the face; though for that matter it might not be wholly depended on, since it was liable to whip around to some other point of the compass.

Bob was riding a little way behind the others. Truth to tell, the Kentucky boy had reached a point where he was compelled to confess, to himself of course, that he was feeling rather tired.

The day had been very hot, and some of their riding of an arduous character, particularly the mountain-climbing part. Still, Bob was possessed of a very determined nature, and would not easily give in. When he felt a pain shoot through any portion of his body, he shut his teeth harder, and took himself to task.

"Want people to think you're a baby, Bob Archer?" he would mutter, as he took a firmer grip on the bridle, and shook it to let Domino know he was awake to the occasion. "As long as Frank can stand it, you should; and you've just got to; hear that?"

The darkness had settled down all around them

in earnest now. Bob was unable to see anything ahead beyond the forms of his two comrades, separated by some thirty feet.

Far off he could make out the tops of the mountains, outlined blackly against the cloudy heavens; but on the plain itself all was a pall of darkness.

One thing gave Bob considerable uneasiness. He feared that they might have the bad luck to run foul of a prairie dog village, such as could be occasionally found on these level stretches of the plains. Stories of horses having their legs broken by stepping into such a burrow, while going at top speed, had been common among the cow punchers of Circle Ranch; and Bob had often dreaded lest Domino meet that fate some unfortunate day or night.

That was really one reason why he lagged behind, so that if trouble came to his comrades he might have ample warning, and check the progress of his horse in time. There was no need of sacrificing Domino without anything to gain by it; and Bob could be a little selfish on account of his horse, where he would scorn to adopt safe measures for himself.

Once or twice Bob fancied he caught some sound in the distance. On second thought, however, he realized that it could not possibly come from those they followed. The soft ground would prevent the beat of their horses' hoofs be-

ing heard any distance; and they were still undoubtedly far away.

Bob, changing his mind about keeping at such a distance in the rear, urged Domino to shorten the gap; for he was getting lonely and wished to have an occasional word with his chum.

"About how long can we keep up this going, Frank?" he questioned, as soon as he had arrived within speaking distance of the leading pair.

"Don't know," answered the one addressed; "that depends on how our horses hold out. Does Domino show any signs of lagging, Bob?"

"Well, he must be tired, after such a long day's trip, and then this gallop thrown in for good measure," replied Bob; "but he's got the grit to keep along with the rest. Honest now, Frank, it wouldn't surprise me if Mr. Riley's big bay was the first to show signs of distress."

"Perhaps you're right, boy," admitted the ex-superintendent, with a chuckle. "I'm not the best judge of horses, like Sim was; but I can tell a fine one when I see him. And this here bay doesn't hold a candle to either of the others. Still, he's good for some little time yet, I reckon."

Bob had to keep a tight rein, for there was always a chance of a horse stumbling. The long, dead grass that covered the plain, was matted in places, so that it formed little traps for flying

feet. It was Frank who had warned him against this ever-present peril.

He found himself wondering what the two fugitives in the advance might be doing. Would they imagine that their pursuers had dropped off with the coming of darkness; and take things so easily that, after a time, those who were following might come up with them?

It was while this thought was passing through Bob's mind that he heard Frank give a sudden exclamation. Immediately he looked ahead, to see a light flash up; and then came a second, over to the left a little distance.

"Why, Frank, are they going to camp?" he asked, in surprise; "and how odd of them to make such big fires. They ought to know we'd see them!"

"You're away off, Chum Bob!" exclaimed Frank, with annoyance in his voice. "Those are not camp fires at all. The smart rascals have taken advantage of the rising wind, and the long dead grass. They've fired the prairie, hoping to cut off pursuit!"

CHAPTER XV

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

FRANK'S words gave his chum a new thrill.

Although he had been in the Southwest nearly a year now, Bob had never seen a prairie fire. Of course he had heard many stories connected with such events, as some of the adventurous cowboys stirred up their memories. And, like all greenhorns, Bob had naturally conceived a great respect, amounting almost to awe, for a conflagration on the boundless plain.

He noted how quickly the fire seemed to spread. It ran along almost like magic, and what looked like an insignificant blaze one minute, in another was a roaring bank of flame, driven forward by the whipping wind.

Mr. Riley had pulled in his horse almost immediately.

"We couldn't get there in time to cross before it would be hot enough to scorch our hair off, Frank!" he exclaimed.

Bob expected that the only thing left for them to do would be to turn back over the plains and head once more for the shelter of the mountains

from which they had so recently come. And with tired horses to depend on, the chances of their being speedily overtaken by that bounding wall of fire were pretty strong.

But Frank knew something about these things. He had listened to many tales of men who had been caught in such a trap; and how they had managed to escape destruction by some clever move.

"Notice the wind, that it's a little off to one side!" he called out.

"Yes, that's so, Frank," replied Mr. Riley, knowing full well that the prairie boy must have some plan in view when he said this, and quite ready to join in with him in following that plan out.

"Our only chance lies in trying to outride the fire to the west!" cried Frank. "It's eating that way slowly, and perhaps we can make it, so as to pass around that end. Come along, and make the horses do their prettiest now!"

With that they were off on the jump. Little need to dig their heels into the heaving sides of the animals. The sight of the fire, increasing in size constantly, as the wind carried the flames into new territory, was enough to excite the flagging energies of the three horses; and they rushed along at a pace that was little short of remarkable, considering their tired condition.

Bob would not let Domino fall behind, even had the black failed to show sufficient energy on his own account. It seemed to the Kentucky lad that once he became separated from his friends he must be overwhelmed in that dreadful fire.

Of course, since they were now galloping almost along the front of the blaze, it was constantly drawing closer to them. Bob could feel the increasing heat. It struck upon his face, and was entirely different from the sensation he had experienced because of the warmth of the day. This was dry, scorching. He could easily imagine what a fierce temperature there must be in the midst of that sizzling, dead grass.

Being entirely unaccustomed to judging anything of this nature, poor Bob conceived the idea that they would not be able to get beyond the outer edge of the long line of fire before it swept down upon them.

"Can we make it, Frank?" he shouted; for there was by this time quite a roaring sound in the air; as well as stifling smoke that made the eyes smart and breathing difficult.

"Sure we will, Bob; make up your mind to that; but keep digging at your horse for all you're worth!" Frank answered, trying to speak cheerily; for he realized just how fearful the spectacle must appear in the eyes of a tenderfoot who had never witnessed anything like it before.

Possibly Frank himself might not have been quite as confident as he pretended. He must surely know how any delay, even of seconds, was likely to play havoc with the best laid plans. And one of a dozen things might happen, if bad luck followed them.

Time was measured in moments just then. Bob, in fact, counted it by heart beats; for something seemed to be pounding against his ribs at a furious rate, which he supposed must be his excited heart.

He noted that they were drawing near the end of the fire line; but at the same time the fact of the conflagration being close to them was made evident by the increased heat.

"Faster yet!" called Frank, bringing down his hand on the flank of Buckskin, in true cowboy manner; and the pony responded gallantly to this urgent demand.

Could Domino rise to the occasion, and make a last spurt? Bob imitated the example of the others, and slapped the flank of his black, at the same time giving the most tremendous yell of which he was capable.

He knew at once that the ruse had succeeded, for Domino seemed fairly to fly over the yielding turf.

If only no unfortunate accident befell them, the goal was bound to be reached. And once

around to the rear of the fire, the danger would be past.

So Bob's spirits rose again, for he was naturally of a buoyant nature. Besides, at the extreme end of the fire line the flames did not seem to be quite so fierce as in the middle. They had to eat up against the breeze, after a fashion.

One last spurt, and they passed the barrier, although compelled to turn their faces the other way on account of the heat.

Bob expected his comrades to give vent to their satisfaction in loud yells. To his surprise they did nothing of the sort. More than that, Frank immediately called out to him, saying:

"Don't whoop it up, Bob! To do that would only let 'em know we'd managed to flank the blaze, and were still after them. As it is, they'll believe we're either caught in the fire, or running before it to beat the band!"

Then Bob saw why silence was the best policy, just then. And more than ever he admired the ready way in which his chum was able to grasp all parts of the game.

The horses were breathing hard, after their recent strain. Bob patted Domino on his wet neck with the true affection a lover of horses feels for the animal that has successfully borne him through a race.

"Good old Domino!" he said, again and again.

"No fellow ever had a braver mount! And I know I'll never meet with your equal in a life time. Bully boy! there never yet was a time when I called on you for an extra spurt but what you had it tied up and waiting. Whew! that was a close shave, though! I reckon my eyebrows must have been singed some!"

Frank and Mr. Riley had again taken an observation. Little use to look up to the dome overhead to get their course, because the clouds completely covered the sky. But the direction of the wind told them what they wanted to know; so that once again the three horses were headed into the Southwest.

"Say, Frank, I was thinking that perhaps they might be able to see us even when we couldn't get a glimpse of them," called out Bob, who was close in the rear.

"That's true for you, Bob," answered the other; "because the fire makes a bright background. But we have to take those chances. Once let us get sight of them, and we'll bring this thing to an end soon enough."

"Wonder what's next?" Bob was saying to himself.

The fact was, he had experienced so many strange things during the last three months, that he was beginning to believe the list must be almost inexhaustable.

No wonder, then, that Bob found himself wondering what he would run across next. It began to seem as if almost anything could happen in this strange country, so different from that surrounding his Kentucky home.

They kept on for another hour.

The fire had passed off far to the eastward. Possibly it would only be halted when it reached the bank of the river which lay in that direction.

By this time the horses were showing unmistakable signs of fatigue, such as none of the three riders could ignore.

"We must pull up soon, Frank," Bob remarked, when he found how reluctantly his mount responded to his further appeals. "Poor Domino is about all in, and I'm not going to break him for all the gold thieves in Arizona."

"That's just what Mr. Riley and myself were saying, Bob," replied the other, as he checked his own horse, and brought his lagging lope down into first a canter, and then a plain walk. "We happen to be close to the foothills right now, and by letting the horses rest up a bit we can reach them inside of half an hour or so."

"But, Frank, what do we want to get to the hills for; you don't expect a cloudburst out here on the open; and we could lie down here as well as most any place?" the Kentucky boy remarked.

"It's just this way," continued Frank, now

alongside his chum, with all the horses walking; "we think those fellows must be somewhere in these hills. They were heading straight for them all the time. Perhaps now they've even got a shanty or a camp here. Perhaps there may be another bunch of the same kind waiting for 'em. Mr. Riley agrees with me that since we've come this far we ought to go on and find out. Understand, Bob?"

"Yes, and let me say that I'm with you every time," returned the other. "You know how set in my ways I am, Frank; and that once I start out to do a thing, how unhappy I always seem unless I get there. So count on me to keep up the good work, if it takes a week. We must get back that stolen treasure, one way or another."

"And we will, Bob, just put that in your pipe and smoke it," replied the other, confidently.

"There's the foothills right ahead of us now!" said Mr. Riley, who had been riding a little in the van, but where he could hear all that was said.

"And we'll none of us be sorry when this long ride is over," remarked Frank.

CHAPTER XVI

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

"We might as well drop off here, boys!" said Mr. Riley, after they had reached the base of the hills.

"Oh! don't change your mind about that, please," sighed Bob, as he slid from his saddle, and almost fell upon the ground.

But this was more on account of the stiffness of his legs than because he was utterly exhausted. He proved this shortly afterwards, when he insisted on removing the saddle and bridle from Domino, and fastening the lariat to his neck, so that the animal might not stray.

The three lolled upon the soft, yielding turf, which never felt finer. Bob was on his back, staring up at the black heavens, back of which the moon shone, even if they could not see it.

"This feels fine and dandy," he commented, stretching himself.

"Couldn't be beat!" declared Frank, who was doing the same thing as was his chum, and with as much relief to his cramped muscles.

"But we've got to go hungry to-night, boys,"

remarked Mr. Riley; "which is some hardship to a couple of lively and growing lads, I take it."

"Oh! if it comes to the worst," chuckled Frank, "I've got a little something here in my ditty bag. Always carry a small lot of dried beef along. Once in a while it comes in mighty handy. Try it, Bob?"

"It might take my mind off other things if I worked my jaws; so perhaps you can pass me along a little hunk," the other replied. "Fact is, I'm more thirsty than near the starvation point."

"Hark!"

Frank said this, as he sat upright.

"It was only one of the horses, Frank, giving a little wheeze," Bob remarked.

"Yes, I know that; and it was Buckskin too," Frank went on. "I reckon I know just what that little wheeze means. The wise chap smells water close by. There must be a creek coming down from the hills somewhere near."

"Perhaps if we listened we might hear it gurgle," suggested Bob.

"That's a good idea, old fellow," Frank observed.

They listened carefully.

"I think I get it," said Frank, whose ears proved to be keener than those of his companions; "and it's over in this direction, too," pointing to the left.

"Suppose you go and see, then," suggested Mr. Riley.

"I will," Frank replied, always ready to do anything that would be for the comfort or pleasure of his friends, no matter what his physical condition.

He was gone perhaps five minutes. when he returned. Bob was startled as he suddenly saw a dark form loom up alongside.

"It's there, just as I expected, fellows," Frank declared. "And so we'd better lead the horses along that way. Fine place to sleep, too, with the music of that little brook sounding in your ears. Nothing could be nicer, according to my way of thinking."

Bob managed to get to his feet. He was surprised to find how stiff he seemed to be after lying there for that short time.

The horses could hardly be restrained; for they knew what awaited them beyond. And once they reached the little stream that came from the heights above, it was astonishing how eagerly they bent down and quaffed the cooling liquid.

They lay there for an hour or more, resting.

"Sleepy, Bob?" asked Frank, after there had been absolute silence for some time.

"Oh! a little," replied the other, candidly; "but not enough to keep me out of any game you're engineering, Frank."

"I thought that perhaps you'd dropped off," remarked Frank, laughingly.

"Well I was thinking of other scenes, that's the truth," admitted Bob; "and didn't pay any attention to what you two were talking about. Is there any game on foot now? Are you thinking of doing a little looking around?"

"That's just what," answered the other; "but we can get on without you, if you'd rather stay here by the horses, and rest up."

Truth to tell, Bob was secretly hoping that would be the programme for them all; but being a proud lad he would not have confessed it for worlds.

"What! me stay here while the rest of you are hunting for those rascals?" he exclaimed, as though indignant at the bare mention of such a thing. "Not much you don't, my boy. I go wherever you do. Just stick a pin through that, will you? And now, what's doing?"

"Oh! well, we just thought we'd like to follow up this stream a bit," said Frank.

"But what for?" demanded the other, groping in darkness as to a motive.

"You know we believe those two robbers came to these foothills?" Frank went on. "And we had some sort of notion that perhaps they knew all along where they were heading. In other words, that they had either a camp here, or else a shack. Get that, Bob?"

"Sure I do; but go on, please," said Bob, eagerly.

"You saw what we did just as soon as we hit here, and got an idea there was water around—made a bee line for the same as fast as we could hike!" Frank continued.

"And you believe they would do the same; is that it?" Bob demanded.

"If anybody put up a shack, or even a camp here, in these hills, he'd be foolish not to make constant use of this little creek. And as we are about at the place where it spreads out on the plain, it stands to reason we must look above for any sign of our game. How about it now, Bob?"

"I'm on, all right. It's as plain as the nose on my face, once you explain the business. And Frank, you'll never have to tell me that thing again. Once is enough for me. Do we start right away?"

"Might as well," replied his chum. "We only expect to go so far; and if nothing shows up, it's back here for us, and a good sleep till morning."

"And then?" Bob continued.

"Oh! we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," laughed Frank, meaning of course, by this, that he and Mr. Riley had not as yet discussed what another day might bring forth.

They took note of the lay of the land, so that when they wished to return to where the

horses had been left they could easily find the place.

"Of course all we have to do is to drop down the hill alongside the stream; but we would want to know when we had arrived," said Frank, as he fastened a spare white handkerchief he happened to have with him, to a stick, which later he thrust into the ground. "I've often been joshed because I carried that along with me when a red bandana is the only kind for a cowboy to have; but it's served a use more than once, and will again," he added.

"Do you think miners have camps in among these hills?" asked Bob, always seeking information.

"How about it, Mr. Riley; you ought to know better than a fellow whose home is about two hundred miles to the north of this, and on a cattle ranch at that?" and Frank turned to the ex-superintendent of the Cherry Blossom mine as he spoke.

"There are no mines here that I know about," replied Mr. Riley. "But every little while we hears about some prospectin' party strikin' copper, or somethin' over here. Reckon now there might be a camp or two around inside of fifty mile; with a bunch of happy-go-lucky fellers holdin' out. P'raps we'll strike one above, an' find our birds minglin' with the rest."

"It might be worse," admitted Frank. "I had an idea we would find that they belonged to some bunch of outlaws from the other side of the border, and come up here just on purpose to rob the Cherry Blossom strong box every month."

"It's all guessing in the air, you see," Mr. Riley remarked. "So let's get a move on, and find out how things stand."

They now left the spot where the three horses were grazing, secured with their ropes; and began to climb upward, following the course of the little stream.

It was not so easy as they might have anticipated, for the trees soon began to shut out what little light came from the clouded heavens, and made it doubly dark.

Bob of course brought up the rear, and Frank was careful not to proceed at such a pace as he fancied might distress his chum, unused to such work.

They had been climbing in this way for some little while, when those in the advance halted, as though they wished the tail-ender to catch up. And when Bob did come along, he was not quite sure whether it had been decided to turn back, or that one of his companions had found out something worth investigating.

"What is it?" was his natural query as he drew up alongside the others.

"Bend your head down, and then look up the hill under these lower branches of the aspen tree. What do you see, Bob?" asked Frank, quietly.

"Why, it's a light, sure!" said the other, almost immediately.

"You're right it is, Bob!"

"But not a camp fire, Frank; it looks to me as if it came out of a window in a cabin of some sort," continued the Kentucky lad, steadily, knowing that his chum wished to learn what he thought, so as to discover whether he were making any advance in woodcraft.

"Just what it is," declared Frank; "and we've got to find out who is in that same cabin."

CHAPTER XVII

THE LONE SHACK

"WELL," said Bob, "I'm glad for one thing; the job will soon be over, and then we can get a little rest."

Frank chuckled at this, upon which his chum hastily continued:

"Now, don't think I'm sorry I came, because I'm not. Nothing could have hired me to stay below there, while you and Mr. Riley were doing things up here. All the same, I admit that I'm some tired, and when we're through with the job I'll throw up my hat and yell."

"So will I, Bob," replied Frank, seriously; "on condition that we meet success in our hunt. But here's Mr. Riley, ready to do some more climbing; so we'd better put off talking till after we've done something worth while."

After that broad hint Bob remained as "dumb as a clam," as he himself would have expressed it.

They still followed the course of the little gurgling stream. Frank's guess in the beginning had turned out to be all right. The shanty, or

shack, whichever it might prove to be, had undoubtedly been built close to the running water. Whoever put it up originally knew the great value of a never-failing spring in the front yard; for this was a land of many deserts.

Foot by foot the three crawled upward. It was not hard going, for the incline at this point proved to be fairly easy; only the brush and undergrowth in places caused them considerable difficulty.

"It's gone!" whispered Bob, presently, in the ear of his chum.

"Chances are it only vanished because some rock came between us and the gleam, and we'll get another peep at the light in a minute," Frank answered.

"Right again, Frank, for there, I just had a glimpse of it once more. And, seems to me, the light is shining brighter than ever."

"We're closer, for one thing," Frank replied.

Mr. Riley did not attempt to act as leader now. Perhaps he had been observing Frank's actions, and come to the conclusion that the lad knew more about these things than he did. As a mine superintendent Mr. Riley was in his element; but he had never professed to be an expert woodsman, or a prairie rider. Hence, he seemed more than satisfied to let Frank take the lead just now.

They had by this time drawn so close that the

light could be plainly seen; and even Bob could tell that it came from some small opening in the wall of a shack, that served the purpose of ventilation, as a window, though it probably had no glass.

Frank was now using redoubled caution. Bob wondered how his chum ever managed to slip along as he did, very much after the manner of a cat creeping up on a wary bird. He seemed to make no sound at all; and Bob was painfully conscious that his own movements must seem clumsy in comparison.

But later on, when he had a chance to ask his chum about it, Frank was loud in his praise; and declared that, considering the little experience which his chum from Kentucky had had, he did remarkably well.

Of course Bob was growing more and more excited the closer they approached to the shack. He wondered what they would see there. Would the occupants prove to be the same two men whom they had chased all the way from the vicinity of the Cherry Blossom mine?

On the other hand, they might turn out to be a party of innocent prospectors, who knew nothing about the robbery of the strong room.

Bob hardly knew which way his hopes turned. Of course he wanted to get back the lost treasure of gold which had been so boldly seized; but he

hoped there would be no desperate fighting. As yet he had never seen a man shot down deliberately; and he feared that Mr. Riley was in a bad temper; for he could hear him grinding his strong white teeth every time his head chanced to come close to that of the ex-superintendent.

Bob noticed one thing. They were no longer heading directly for the light, but had veered off a little. Apparently, then, Frank meant to approach it from an angle; or else he had some other nice little scheme in view.

Suddenly Bob felt the hand of his chum grip his arm. He understood from this that he was expected to remain perfectly motionless. The light was temporarily blotted out to some extent; but there was no mystery about it.

Some one had thrust a head out of the window, as though to take an observation. Bob found himself wondering whether the fellow was interested in the state of the weather; or imagined that he had heard some suspicious sound near by, which deserved attention.

For perhaps a full minute they all remained there like statues. Then the light shone again. The man had drawn in his head!

Frank moved silently away again, still veering to one side. He gently drew Bob after him, as though giving him to understand that it was his wish they should all keep together.

In this manner, then, they reached the wall of of the shack, which Bob speedily discovered was constructed of logs.

Even before they had arrived Bob made a discovery. He knew why Frank had concluded that the risk of peeping in at the window was too great. There was a far better opportunity to accomplish the same purpose without taking any chances.

When it was originally built, perhaps, the cabin had been made wind-proof in the customary way by filling the chinks between the logs with mud; which, drying in the course of time, would resemble mortar. In numerous places this had fallen away, leaving little gaps, through which the light came, varied according to the size of the opening.

Bob saw that these presented excellent peep-holes. By putting an eye to such a crack pretty nearly all the interior of the cabin might be explored, granted that the light remained within.

And again did Bob find occasion to admire the smartness of his chum, while mentally deploring his own lack of the same quality.

Each of the three creepers selected a crack for his field of operations, and quickly put his eye to it.

What Bob saw, his two companions also gazed upon. It did not amount to much, for the lone

cabin in the foothills was utterly devoid of anything in the shape of comforts, showing that it had long been deserted.

Two men were in sight. They sat upon a couple of old chairs that had once been built by the pioneer occupying the cabin, and left behind when he departed for regions unknown. There was a slab of wood that served as a table, such as it was; and upon this stood a lantern.

A fire crackled upon the hearth, and some sort of meal seemed to be cooking in a kettle; for the steam was coming out under the lid, and there was also an odor of beans.

Bob did not like the looks of the two men. Perhaps they might be prospectors; but their faces were certainly vicious ones. And judging from their appearance, they had lately been through more or less hard luck. They looked tired and ugly.

Bob immediately came to the conclusion that these must be the men he and his comrades had chased all the way from Cherry Blossom mine. They were talking at intervals, but while the murmur of their voices came to his ear, he could not make out a single word they said. The stream happened to drop several feet in a little waterfall close by; and this created a volume of sound calculated to deaden any ordinary noise.

Bob pulled Frank's head down close to his

mouth, so he could whisper. It was very important, in his eyes at least, that he should start off right. If these two men were only strangers, in whom they had no interest, what folly for him to keep on believing that they were the gold thieves.

"Are they the ones we chased?" was what he whispered into Frank's ear.

"Yes, sure!" came the reply; "and I know one only too well. It's Reddy Cramer. Mr. Riley knows him, too."

Frank had taken pattern from Bob in drawing the head of the other down, so he might say these few words directly into his ear.

Bob made no reply. None seemed necessary under the circumstances. Yes, he remembered hearing all sorts of stories about that same Reddy Cramer. Frank had told him how the man had given so much trouble at the mine; and some six months back had been run out of camp, with a warning that he would be harshly handled should he ever dare come back.

Reddy had evidently waited his time about returning. And he had formed a plan whereby he could have the laugh on the superintendent. Perhaps he knew about the threatening strike. Possibly he may even have had friends fomenting trouble at the Cherry Blossom, so as to make his raid the more easily carried out. If one-half that

had been told about Reddy were true, he would have been equal to this.

But, somehow, Bob thought the squatty man with the red hair did not look as happy as he might for one who had just carried a brilliant stroke of business to completion. In fact, he seemed to have a dark scowl on his face. And as Bob noted his actions he saw him bring his clenched fist down on the slab of wood serving as a table, with considerable vim, as he said something to his mate.

This latter was a tall, lean fellow. He had a dark skin, and Bob fancied that possibly he was a Mexican, though he dressed as an American. Whether a gambler, or just an ordinary business man gone wrong, if his face were an index to his character, he must be a good match for Reddy.

Bob now began to wonder what the next move would be. If these were the robbers, of course they must be captured. Could this be done without a fight? They looked like desperate men, and must be heavily armed. Having once gained possession of the gold such fellows would certainly not give up their prize tamely.

This brought another thrill in its train. Bob had never been closely connected with any real out and out "scrap," as the boys of Circle Ranch would call it. He thought longingly of those same

boys right now, and wished a few of them might be along to throw the weight of their influence in the scale.

True, with Mr. Riley to assist, they were three against two; but then there could hardly be any comparison between a pair of half grown boys, and these desperate men.

But, as has been said before, Bob was not lacking in what the boys of the ranch called "sand." He shut his teeth firmly together, and made up his mind that no matter what was required of him, he would do his level best to fill the bill. Frank must have no occasion to feel ashamed of his Kentucky chum.

Besides, if this bold robbery were let go unpunished, it would undoubtedly serve as a bait to tempt others to try the same game. Consequently the rich gold mine must soon become an unprofitable business. And his father had a heavy interest in the successful working of the Cherry Blossom.

He began to speculate as to how they ought to manage so as to take the pair of scoundrels by surprise. Two of them might jump in through the open door, which was on the side of the cabin opposite the window, and thus uphill; while the other could lean through the window, and call upon the men to throw up their hands.

Or perhaps Frank might think it worth while to hang around a bit. The men looked dead

tired, and would have to lie down soon. While they slept they might be taken by surprise, and captured the more easily.

So Bob was weaving fancies as he knelt there, and glued his eye to his crack between two logs. Frank was alongside, and, just beyond, Mr. Riley occupied himself in much the same fashion.

It was while the Kentucky boy was trying to figure upon the best plan of action, just to see how near he could come to what must be passing in Frank's mind, that he became aware of a certain fact that seemed to alter conditions completely.

The window was over on the left, but plainly seen from his peep-hole. He chanced to glance that way, possibly his eye being attracted by some slight movement, Bob never knew. And to his utter astonishment he discovered a human face thrust cautiously up above the sill, while a pair of keen eyes ranged around the interior of the lone shack on the hillside!

CHAPTER XVIII

"WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK!"

"HUSH!"

Frank's hand gripped Bob's arm even as this warning hiss sounded in his ear. And Bob knew that his chum must have caught sight of that face at the same time he did. Undoubtedly Frank had felt a sudden fear lest the other call out, or in some other way betray their presence. And he wished to give warning, so that Bob might control his feelings.

Who was the man? His face was a strange one to Bob. Could he be the third fellow who may have been deserted by Reddy and his companion? And if so, had he followed them all the way here, bent upon some revenge, to get even for their treachery?

He was gone again now; but Bob did not imagine he had left the neighborhood of the shack. If, as he believed, the fellow proved to be the third robber, he would want his share of the spoils; and in order to get it would hang around until the chance arose.

It was too bad, in one way, because his presence

was apt to interfere with any plan they might arrange. But then Frank was smart enough, perhaps, to profit by what seemed like a disaster.

Again Bob turned his attention to the two men inside. They seemed to have no suspicion that they were being watched. Perhaps they believed their comrade must ere this have fallen into the hands of the miners; or met his fate in some deep hole in the mountains, to which they had consigned him, when he was taken off his guard.

They were arguing again. Each seemed trying to convince the other of something, and the pounding of the slab table kept up. Bob wondered whether they might not come to the point of an open rupture. That would profit those who sought to effect their capture.

The time crept on. Bob was beginning to grow tired of crouching there, peeping through that narrow slit between the logs. He wished something would happen to bring about a change.

The two men had apparently arrived at some conclusion, for they pushed back from the table.

"All right, then, it's a go, Reddy!" Bob heard the tall man exclaim. "If we're going to separate we'll divvy things up, share and share alike!"

"I tell ye, Blaisdell, it's goin' to be too hot around here to suit me, after this job," the other was saying; "and I'm set on hikin' out of the section. Further North they don't know Reddy

Cramer, an' I kin get a chance to work in. 'Sides, I'm hopin' some to set eyes on a certain gent that I owes a heap to; and' if I do, he'll never crow again over what he did to me."

Bob was unable to make anything out of this. If Frank succeeded better he found no means of communicating the fact to his chum. Indeed, Bob did not dream that he could have a particle of interest in this unknown party against whom Reddy seemed to be holding a grudge.

The man called Blaisdell stepped over to the middle of the room. Stooping, he seemed to dig his fingers under a certain rough plank of the floor. As a usual thing such border cabins have only the hard earth to serve as a floor; but the man who built this shack had gone to the trouble of cutting timber, splitting it, and even making rough planks with which to cover the earth.

When Blaisdell had pulled one of these up he bent over. Bob felt himself shivering with eagerness and anticipation. Of course there could be but one explanation of the actions of the two robbers. Having agreed to part company they were now about to divide the spoils.

Since he had figured it all out in this way, Bob was therefore not much surprised to see Blaisdell toss out what looked to be a small bag. After that he bent down again and secured a second. Mr. Riley had said there were three; but the man

made no further movement looking to unearthing another sack.

Well, if they managed to recover two-thirds of the treasure, that was worth while, Bob thought, as he fixed his eyes on the bundles. It struck him that Blaisdell must be a much stronger man than his thin appearance would seem to indicate. Mr. Riley had said that each of the three sacks must have weighed in the neighborhood of sixty pounds; and here was a man who thought little of tossing such a package aside, as though it were next to nothing.

Bob expected to see each of the men pick up one of the bags, and start for the door. He even found himself wondering what Frank's next move might be. Would he try to stop them from departing? Undoubtedly they must have horses somewhere close by, for they had come there mounted.

They sat down again, as if to talk matters over once more, with the two sacks of treasure close to their feet.

If only now Reddy and Blaisdell would go out of the shack for a short time, to saddle their horses, it might be that a fine chance would come up for the recovery of the treasure! Bob believed he could slip inside the cabin himself, and carry off one of the sacks.

Suddenly Bob saw something moving near the

open door. At first he could not make out what it was that kept advancing so strangely.

Presently he managed to figure out what seemed to be a human head—no, there were two of them, belonging to men who had covered their bodies with an old blanket, and were thus creeping, inch by inch, toward the inmates of the shack.

Reddy and Blaisdell did not see what was coming, because they happened to have their backs toward the door. And Bob found himself strangely thrilled by the prospect of an encounter in which he and his companions would have no part.

Perhaps the newcomers might turn out to be some of Reddy's former companions, who, knowing of his recent raid on the strong room of the Cherry Blossom mine, had determined to pay his shack in the foothills a secret visit, in hope of snatching his rich spoils away.

Of course Frank and Mr. Riley were watching just as eagerly as was Bob; and perhaps they, too, began to entertain hopes of being able to profit from what was about to happen in the cabin.

The gray blanket kept moving along the floor toward the spot where Reddy and his companion sat and talked earnestly, with the two sacks at their feet.

Suddenly Bob gave a little gasp.

"It's coming!" he exclaimed, as he saw Blaisdell turn his head and look.

Immediately things began to happen. First of all the gray blanket was seen to rear up, as the pair of hiding men scrambled to their feet. At the same time Reddy and Blaisdell jumped up, with hoarse shouts.

Bob heard a shot, several of them in fact. He knew that the four men were struggling desperately at close quarters, and that undoubtedly the advantage lay with the newcomers, who had surprised the others.

For a short time he crouched there, staring through the crack, fascinated by the scene, yet appalled at the same time.

One of the struggling men had gone down heavily. Bob believed that it must be Blaisdell, for he could still see Reddy struggling with one of the intruders.

They reeled about the room, each striving to get the advantage.

Bob at this moment became aware of the fact that some one was pulling at his arm. Of course it was Frank, who wanted to make a change in their position, and was desirous of having his chum accompany him.

Bob arose, and keeping hold of the other. started off. Frank was heading to pass around the corner of the shack; and it was not difficult to understand that the open door was the object of his attention.

Mr. Riley, too, was with them, only too anxious to have a hand in what was taking place inside the cabin. While he had kept on grinding his strong teeth together, no doubt at the same time he was holding his passions in check with the greatest difficulty. And here was where he expected to get even for the little joke Reddy and his comrades had played upon him as the superintendent of the Cherry Blossom mine.

Of course it took but a very little time to round the corner of the hut; and as they did so Bob saw the figure of a man rush out of the cabin, carrying some bulky object over his shoulder.

"He's gone, Frank, and carried one of the bags off with him!" cried the Kentucky boy, astonished and overwhelmed by what he had seen.

They were now at the door, and could look in. Blaisdell lay motionless in a corner; while the man who had been wrestling with Reddy appeared to have managed to get the better of him. He was kneeling over the other, and seemed to be either threatening him with some weapon, or else trying to tie his wrists.

"Look out for him, Mr. Riley!" cried Frank. "You, Bob, come along with me!"

A little while before Bob had been complaining about feeling weary. All that had passed away now; and really he forgot that there was such a thing as fatigue. The excitement of the moment

had him in its grip, and he believed he could run as well as ever in his life.

Frank had darted off even while speaking, and there was no need to tell Bob what object he had in view. That second sack of treasure must be recovered. To let this bold thief steal it from Reddy was not to be thought of.

Bob could hear the fellow plunging down the side of the hill. Doubtless he was satisfied with having secured his share of the plunder, and willing to let his companion shift for himself.

They could hear him plainly; for in his haste the man crashed through any and all obstructions that came in his way. Several times from the sounds it would appear as though he must have fallen. On each occasion, however, he evidently recovered himself, and continued the flight.

"What's he going to do, Frank?" he managed to ask, as he kept alongside the other.

"Horses below somewhere!" came the short reply, showing that Frank himself had been figuring on the meaning of the man's actions.

"We're gaining some, aren't we?" Bob went on, eagerly; for he was now deeply interested in the result of the chase.

"Yes, that bag holds him back some," answered the other.

Bob could well understand that. If it weighed about sixty pounds it was no little handicap for

the fellow who was heading down the slope of the hill. And little wonder that he pitched headlong several times.

It looked as though the treasure taken from the Cherry Blossom strong room was fated to be recovered piecemeal. Here was one sack; another still lay on the floor of the shack above, while the hiding place of the third still remained a mystery to be solved later on.

All at once the plunging ceased, and there was silence. So profound was this that Bob could hear the fret and murmur of the falling water not far away.

"That last tumble must have settled him, Frank!" he grasped; for the sudden silence had indeed been preceded by a crash of unusual violence.

"Perhaps that's so," Frank admitted; "or else he's trying a change of tactics!"

"In what way?" asked Bob.

"Knowing that we could follow him as long as he kept up all that row, he may be crawling away now. Come on, Bob; we've just got to get him —and that bag!"

The halt had been but momentary. They were once more in full pursuit, heading for the spot where that last crash among the bushes had been heard.

Bob believed that never before in all his life

had he taken part in such an exciting time as came with the pursuit of the men who had carried off the treasure.

And for all he knew the end was not yet, since none of the gold had been recovered, despite their strenuous efforts.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SURRRENDER

"Do you hear him now, Frank?" whispered the Kentucky boy, as they once more halted for a few seconds, and listening eagerly.

"I thought I caught some sort of little rustling sound," came the answer.

"Which way?" continued Bob.

"There! that was it again!" exclaimed Frank. "Come along, and be careful not to stumble if you can help it."

That was easy to say, but, to tell the truth, Bob never had a more difficult task set before him. The darkness of the night prevented him from making sure of his footing; and there were so very many of those troublesome vines trailing across the way, that at any second he was apt to catch his foot in one.

Still, he was doing his best to carry out the wishes of his chum. It seemed most important that they should overtake the fellow who had snatched up one of those treasure bags, and was straining every nerve in the endeavor to escape with the spoils which Reddy and Blaisdell had just been about to divide, ere separating.

Of course Bob had sized up the situation ere now. He knew that these two newcomers must be former associates of the three gold thieves. Possibly they had been betrayed, and, feeling that they had been harshly treated, the result was a scheme to call on Reddy at his lone shack, after the affair had been concluded, and secure the treasure for themselves.

The two boys were again advancing. Frank believed he knew just where the suspicious sounds came from; and having mentally located the spot, he now hoped to catch the fellow.

A jack-rabbit bounded out from the bushes, and jumped away. The sound gave Bob a start, for he thought it must mean a sudden rush on the part of the man they were after.

"Only a long-ear!" whispered Frank; for as his arm was in touch with that of his chum, he felt the quiver that passed over Bob.

Even this circumstance had not diverted the attention of Frank from the spot where he fully believed the fugitive was crouching.

Knowing the desperate nature of men who could engage in such a risky business, Bob fully anticipated that he and Frank would be fired upon at any moment. To be sure, this fellow could not know who they were, but must suppose his pursuers were Reddy and Blaisdell. These two would not be apt to show any mercy, should they over-

take their former friend; and, consequently, the man in hiding would feel that his situation was desperate.

Just as Bob had expected, Frank had a plan that fitted the occasion.

"Stop!" was whispered in his ear, as he felt his comrade bending down.

Frank seemed to be feeling for something or other, perhaps a stone; whatever it was, he had evidently succeeded in finding it, for he immediately straightened up, and Bob knew that his arm was swinging for a cast.

Then came a crash as the stone landed in a thicket some thirty feet below. Instantly there was a bright flash, and the report of a pistol. The crouching fugitive had discharged his weapon, aiming at the spot where he believed one of his pursuers was located.

A second and a third shot followed as fast as he could pull the trigger. Bob heard his chum chuckle as though greatly pleased. This was some more of that woodcraft which played so great a part in the education of a boy born and raised in the West.

They knew now exactly where the fellow was located. That was one good thing. Perhaps another was the fact that he had exhausted half the contents of his revolver.

Bob knew that Frank was stooping again. He

must be so well satisfied with the result of his first test, that he wanted to make another try.

When he felt his chum rise up again, the Kentucky boy knew what to expect. And this time, if anything, the crash in the bushes was louder than before. The stone had been adroitly cast, so that it should fall a little further on.

Apparently Frank had carried out his little scheme so well that it completely deceived the man in hiding. He must have thought that while his enemy may have escaped serious injury in that first volley, he was now in full retreat.

So the hidden one began again to pull the trigger, and three shots rang out in rapid succesion.

Then a silence fell upon the side of the foothills!

Bob heard Frank laugh softly to himself as though quite pleased over the success of his scheme.

"His gun's empty," whispered Frank; "I've pulled the snake's fangs. Now for a rush in on him. Ready, Bob?"

"Yes, say when," answered the other, nerving himself for the concluding act in the stirring little drama.

"Now! Come on!"

At these words Frank sprang forward, with Bob at his side, ready to do his best to assist in the work of rounding up the treasure thief.

They no longer cared to conceal the fact of their coming. Indeed, it seemed to Bob that his chum made more noise than was really necessary as he plunged down the side of the hill toward the spot from whence those flashes had sprung.

"He wants to make the fellow think a whole army is closing in on him, and scare him into surrendering!" was the thought that flashed through Bob's mind, even as he was leaping forward.

That was just what Frank meant. He knew that the fellow could still give them more or less trouble if he tried to continue his mad flight down the descent. But as he already believed that he had foes beyond, since the stones had crashed in the bushes there, with these new enemies coming down on him from the rear he must feel that he was hemmed in.

"Surrender!" shouted Frank, as gruffly as possible.

"We've got you surrounded! No use trying to run away! Better give up!" called Bob, falling in with the idea which he realized his comrade had in view.

They must by now be very near the spot where the unknown crouched. The question which arose was whether he would be seriously impressed with a sense of his position, and surrender or try to escape.

"Nothin' doing, Reddy; I quit!" a hoarse voice

suddenly shouted, almost under their feet; and at same instant Bob caught sight of a moving figure, dimly seen in the dense shadows.

"Throw up your hands, quick!" snapped Frank, just as he imagined Old Hank Coombs might call out under similar circumstances.

"They are up, as high as I kin get 'em, Reddy, so don't bother shootin'!" cried the unknown.

"Drop down on your face then, and lie there!" Bob heard his chum order; and he was more than ever filled with admiration for the clever manner in which Frank seemed able to manage things.

The dark, shadowy figure immediately got down on the ground, as though only too eager to oblige. Frank threw himself upon the fellow's back without wasting any time.

"Get one of his arms here, and help me put this handkerchief around his wrists, Reddy!" he said, still trying to make his voice sound as gruff as possible, in order to keep up the deception.

Bob understood why he did this. If the man imagined for a single second that he had given in to a couple of boys, he might start fresh hostilities, overcome by a sense of rage and humiliation.

So Bob groped for the fellow's left arm, finding which he drew it back until Frank could cross the two wrists. Then the big and stout bandana handkerchief was wrapped several times around, to be eventually secured by triple knots.

"That ought to hold him fast, Frank!" remarked Bob, who was feeling a sense of satisfaction over the final success that had followed their hot chase down the side of the foothills.

"It will, too," replied the other, as he took his knee off the back of the unfortunate man. "Now, get up!"

It was not so easy a thing to do, considering the fact that his arms were held fast behind him. The man started to obey, but Bob had to help him. Presently, however, he was on his feet, muttering to himself.

"Bob, you hold on to him, and if he makes the first move to run, trip him up, even if he breaks his nose in falling," remarked Frank.

"That goes!" answered the other, sturdily, as he secured a grip on the prisoner's arm that told he meant business.

Frank seemed to be fumbling in his pocket.

"What you going to do, Frank?" demanded his chum.

"I'm after a match," came the reply.

"Oh! you want to take a look at our prisoner; is that it?"

"Shucks! no, not just now. I'm going to find out where he left that bag," came the reply, as a crackling sound told he had secured the match he wanted.

When the light flared up the eyes of the

prisoner were turned on first one of the saddle boys and then the other. Plainly he was amazed at what he saw. Instead of Reddy and Blaisdell he discovered that his captors were only a pair of lads.

Bob had been curious enough to let his eyes seek the face of the prisoner for a second or two. Not that he was anxious to see how the man looked; but what he thought of the situation.

"Don't you try to get away, or something will happen that you won't like, mister," Bob said, threateningly; for from the disgusted expression on the face of the man he feared that he might make a bolt.

Frank searched as long as the match burned; but, as Bob did not hear him utter any exclamation of satisfaction, he concluded that success had not as yet come to him. The fugitive must have tried to hide the sack of treasure, thinking that if he got away he could come creeping back later on and recover possession of the spoils.

But Frank had other matches. And he was not the boy to let one little failure discourage him. Having covered about all the ground in the immediate vicinity he conceived the idea of retracing their steps, and keeping a bright lookout as they went along.

"Stir him up, and make him go ahead, Bob;" he remarked. "If he tries any funny business

you know just what to do; and don't be afraid to give it to him straight."

Such talk as this was apt to make the prisoner think twice before attempting to escape. He must evidently believe that while his captors might only be boys, they had been in touch with men of the ranch and the mine so long that they knew all the ropes, and were not to be treated lightly.

"Get along!" said Bob,

Grumblingly the fellow obeyed. He seemed to have no choice in the matter, since, with his arms bound, he was practically helpless.

They started up the hill. It was slow work climbing, not nearly so easy as their descent had been. But Frank had an object in what he was doing. From time to time he would strike a match, and take a keen observation. Not a tree trunk escaped him, for he imagined that when the fellow got rid of his bag he would naturally enough fling it behind some such object.

Bob, walking alongside the prisoner, and giving him an occasional punch with his elbow just to remind him that he was on the alert, heard his chum give utterance to a little laugh.

"Found it, Frank?" he cried, all excitement.

"Sure thing," replied the other, as he stepped to one side; "here it is, sticking out from behind this crooked aspen, just as he flung it. Everything's all right, Bob, old fellow."

CHAPTER XX

AN ASTONISHING DISCOVERY

"HURRAH!"

Bob could not keep from giving voice to his delight in this way. He saw Frank tugging at some object, and then throw it on his shoulder.

"Keep right along up, Bob; and don't let him pull the wool over your eyes. We may want to take him to Phoenix yet, and hand him over to the marshal," was what Frank was saying.

Bob could hear the man give a dismal grunt. He had not suspected the presence of others when he started to work this trick on his former comrades, with the idea of making off with the gold they had secured.

In this way, then, they retraced their way upward. Bob would never have dreamed that they had covered such a distance in the short space of time they had been pursuing the escaping thief. But then, it had been all down-hill, and the desire to get away had caused the man to cover ground at a lively rate.

Frank had found the little stream again. He

was making use of it to keep in a direct line for the lone shack, located somewhere beyond.

Once the man made an effort to break away, as though his fears overcame his discretion. But Bob was "on the job," as he said himself. He did not lose his grip of the fellow, despite the abruptness of the wrench. And, remembering his instructions from Frank, he threw out his foot, and tripped the man, who fell heavily.

Frank came springing back in an instant.

"What's going on here, Bob?" he demanded.

"He tried it, just as you said he might!" replied the other, breathlessly.

"And you tripped him, was that it?"

"Listen to him grunt, will you?" said Bob, feeling a little compassion for the man, who had come down quite hard.

Frank still had matches left, and striking one of these he bent over to find out how seriously the prisoner was hurt.

"You're lucky only to have a few bruises, and a nose bleed," he declared, presently, after he had investigated. "Perhaps you'll understand now that even if we are boys, my chum and I mean to hold on to you. Now, get up, and don't you try that sort of game again, if you know what's good for you."

He helped the fellow get on his feet. There was an air of dejection about the man now, as

though he had really come to the conclusion that the net had closed in around him, and he would have to "throw up his hands."

"I'm done!" he muttered. "I was foolish to try it on. An' ketched by a pair o' kids, too!"

That last exclaimation seemed to size up the whole bitterness of the situation. Had it been grown men who had effected his capture, evidently the fellow would not have felt so keenly about his misfortune; but he evidently wondered how he could ever hold up his head among his fellows again, after allowing a couple of boys to down him.

Several minutes later Frank called out:

"I see the light again, Bob. Keep going, and we'll be there soon!"

"I'm glad of it," declared the Kentucky boy, with a sigh; for he was pretty nearly exhausted with fatigue and excitement.

Pretty soon even Bob caught sight of the gleam of light that came from the window of the lone shack, where Reddy and his partner in the robbery of the mine had their headquarters.

Then Bob's mind flew back to the last glimpse he had had of that interior, at the time the fellow dashed out of the door, with the bag on his back, and they took up the chase.

He remembered distinctly now that Blaisdell had seemed to be lying senseless on the floor over

in a corner, where he had been knocked during the fight. The other robber, he who had engineered the whole affair from start to finish, had been almost equally helpless under the knee of the second intruder, the companion of the man they chased down the hillside.

And Bob also recollected that, as Frank led the way in hot pursuit, he had called out to Mr. Riley to take charge at the shack. That would possibly mean he was to enter the little cabin, and attack the fellow who was pressing Reddy down.

How would they find matters on their arrival? Had the ex-superintendent of the Cherry Blossom mine been able to obtain the mastery of the situation? Bob had in times past heard certain stories about Mr. Riley that stamped him as a brave man. The fact that he had barricaded himself in the engine-house, and was defying the striking miners, went to prove this fact.

Yet as they drew near the shack Bob confessed to himself that some of his former nervousness had returned. He wondered whether he and Frank would become embroiled in another affair with some of these lawless men. Bob hoped not. Though ready to do his duty, and willing to stand back of his chum in his effort to recover the treasure that had been taken from the mine, Bob did not find any delight in scenes of turmoil and fighting.

Frank, carrying the bag on his shoulder, approached the shack with confidence. Evidently he trusted Mr. Riley fully, and did not allow the slightest suspicion that the other could have made a failure of his part in the game to enter his mind.

The first thing that Bob noticed was the ominous stillness that seemed to hang over the place. He did not know whether this might be favorable or not.

"Frank, do you think they all got away; and what could have happened to Mr. Riley?" he could not help asking.

"Don't you bother about Mr. Riley," laughed his chum; "when the count is made up, you'll sure find him on deck, and carrying things with a high hand. Bring your man right along in, Bob. Here we are!"

They had turned the corner of the shack, and the open door stood before them. While passing the window Bob had been sorely tempted to turn his eyes aside, in order to take a look; but a stern sense of his duty made him pause. For he had a faint suspicion that should he slacken in watchfulness over his prisoner, the man was desperate enough to make another attempt at flight, even though his arms were bound.

"Oh! Mr. Riley did it, as sure as anything!" was the exclamation that broke from Bob's lips, involuntarily, as he stepped into the shack.

He saw the former mine superintendent standing over two men, who were on the floor. Looking a little farther Bob discovered that Blaisdell was sitting in the corner, nursing his head, as though it pained. None of the three rascals seemed to be in possession of a weapon of any kind, which would probably account for the little arsenal that lay on the floor close to Mr. Riley. He had seen to it that they were completely disarmed.

Noting all these things Bob gave a big sigh of relief. It began to look as though the end might be near. They had had a hard time of it. They had secured two of the three original thieves; and it appeared as if at least two-thirds of the spoils had been recovered!

No wonder, then, Bob was ready to throw up his hat, and yell. Something seemed to hold him back, however. Perhaps it was because his chum did not manifest any particular signs of being overjoyed.

Mr. Riley looked up as they came in, and his thin face was wreathed in a grim smile at seeing how Frank carried the missing bag; while Bob ushered the runaway thief into the shack.

"Got 'em both, eh, boys?" he greeted them with. "Now that's what I call going some. And I reckon as how the Colonel will be proud of your carryin's-on. Looks some snug in here, doesn't it, Frank?"

There was something so comical in this last remark that Frank had to laugh. No doubt it did look "snug" from the standpoint of Mr. Riley; but the four men who had been "rounded up" so completely certainly gave no evidence of appreciating the situation. Scowls and black looks marked the faces of all of them.

Frank had dropped his sack alongside the other. Turning quickly he noticed the look Reddy cast, first at the pair of bags, and then at those who were now in complete possession.

"Sit down there with your friends!" Bob told the man who had run off with a part of the treasure.

Thus the quartette were ranged along the floor. Mr. Riley asked Frank to make use of some stout cord which he chanced to have in his pocket; and as none of the prisoners dared resist, the result was that inside of a few minutes all of them were rendered as helpless as the man Bob had brought back to the cabin.

"I want to shake hands with each of you boys," he said, gravely, as he approached Frank; "and say that you're sure a credit to Circle Ranch. If so be they run that way there, I'll willingly accept the offer, the Colonel makes me, an' change bunks. And I reckon this boy from Kentucky is no more in the tenderfoot class after this!"

Reddy was still observing them with a queer ex-

pression on his face. It seemed as though the fellow might be trying hard to repress a grin. And considering how desperate his situation seemed, the fact that he could see any humor in things was indeed singular.

Perhaps, though, he was thinking how their victory must be incomplete because of the fact that one of the bags of treasure was still missing. That was what passed through Bob's mind, at any rate, as he let his eye rest on the two sacks.

"Open one of these, while I take the other, Bob," Frank said, as he dropped down on the floor beside the spoils.

Reddy's grin grew still broader. He even tried to nudge Blaisdell with his elbow, although the effort proved a failure, owing to the fact that his arms were too securely bound to admit of any play.

Bob was only too willing to comply with the directions of his chum. He imagined that Frank wanted to learn whether the whole amount of stolen gold could have been crowded into two bags, instead of three; which was a possible way of dividing it, after their number had been reduced.

The first thing Bob thought, after he had dropped to the floor, and laid hands on the nearest bag, was the deception that existed about these things. For sixty pounds, perhaps nearer ninety,

that little bag certainly felt light indeed. But then, possibly that might be only imagination.

He found that a stout cord had been passed several times around the mouth of the sack, and as a knot promised to baffle his efforts to undo it, the string was cut.

Bob opened the bag, fully expecting to discover the yellow glitter of gold. He stared, and then bent his head lower, as though hardly able to believe his eyes. Frank's low laugh surprised him, and made him look up, to find his chum regarding him with an expression on his face that was a mixture of chagrin and humor.

"What did you draw, Bob?" he asked. "I seem to have a lot of packages that look as if they might hold flour, sugar, coffee, and such things; besides some tin cups, and a platter or two; a healthy lot of supplies for a prospector to start with."

"Whew! same here," gasped Bob, who had really never been more surprised in his life at making such a disappointing discovery. "Whatever can it mean, Frank; and what do you suppose they've done with the treasure they stole from the Cherry Blossom mine?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE CONTENTS OF THE PACKET

It was Reddy who laughed now. How could he help it, when viewing the astonished face of Bob Archer, who was sitting there on the floor, and dumping out the miscellaneous assortment of eatables that had been contained in the sacks?

Frank knew that the solution to the mystery would lie with the man who had engineered the theft. He had wondered at the disconsolate appearance of both Reddy and Blaisdell while they were discussing matters; finally agreeing to each take a bag, and get out on separate trails.

Where was the treasure then, if they did not have it? Could it be that, fearing capture, they had hidden the gold? Even Bob could see that there was but a slight chance of this proving to be the truth.

Just then Bob happened to remember that, according to all accounts, there had been a third member of the bold outfit. All along he and Frank had rested under the delusion that Reddy and Blaisdell must have left this man behind, after taking his share of the plunder.

"Say, perhaps the shoe was on the other foot, and he got theirs!" exclaimed Bob, almost involuntarily.

At that Reddy chuckled again.

"I call that a good guess, now," he remarked, nodding to Frank, and winking his eye in the direction of the Kentucky lad.

Frank understood.

"Meaning that the third man beat you out of your shares; is that it, Reddy?" he asked, as he stepped closer to the other.

"That's just what he did!" growled the man known as Blaisdell, and who appeared to be even more dissatisfied with the way matters had turned out than the leader himself.

"There were three sacks in the beginning?" Frank went on, holding up that number of fingers as if to emphasize his point.

"Three—that's right. Mr. Riley knows it's so, don't you Mr. Riley?" the man with the fiery hair admitted.

"Just one apiece, eh? And somehow in the shuffle this third fellow managed to hoodwink you two, so that he got away with the whole business. Clever work to pull the wool over the eyes of such a smart fellow as you're said to be, Reddy Cramer!" Frank went on, thinking he would hear the particulars sooner if only he could excite the temper of the other.

"Aw! he just ketched us nappin', that's how it

happened," grumbled Blaisdell, who seemed to feel so keenly the utter collapse of their scheme that he was in a frame of mind to tell everything he knew.

And Reddy, seeing this evidence of turning state's evidence on the part of his comrade, was himself willing to confess.

"We thought he was true blue, but he fooled us, that's how," he remarked.

"But it's hard to believe that one man could carry away the whole three bags of gold dust and nuggets," remonstrated Frank. "Mr. Riley, here, says they'd weigh something like two hundred pounds. How about that, Reddy?"

"That's all in the trick," replied the other. "You see, it was this way. When we got off, each of us had a bag along. But we expected to have a warm time gettin' away with the loot. And we had made up a plan to deceive Riley and his crowd."

"Yes," broke in Blaisdell, bitterly, "an' don't forget to say right there as how 'twas our smart pal that suggested that delightful scheme, which you an' me tumbled right into, never dreamin' that he had all the pipes laid to dock us, an' leave us to hold the bag, which didn't have the gold in, but the grub. Aw! this knocks me out, sure! Never kin look anybody in the face again after bein' took in so easy; so dead easy!"

"We cached the three bags, all right," Reddy

went on, "meaning to come back for 'em after we'd put any pursuers on the wrong scent. Then we started off to leave a broad trail behind, beginnin' from the strong room of the Cherry Blossom. Reckon as how ye must a seen that trail, son?"

"We did for a fact, and started out on it, just as you expected," declared Frank; "when, by chance, we found a much newer trail crossing the old, and made by two men instead of three. You never meant us to find that trail, because by following it we got you sighted."

"No more we did," admitted Reddy. "But, the fact is, around that time Blaisdell and me was so mad at being taken in like a pair of tenderfeet by that traitor, that we just didn't care much what came along. We done our best to fix you with that broken cliff trail. Then, when ye still follered, we started the blaze on the level; and reckoned as how that had put you out of the running."

"But it didn't, as you understand now," Frank went on, believing that he was getting nearer the explanation of the matter.

"Yes, some fellers have the nine lives of a cat; and looks like you boys might belong in that class," sneered Blaisdell.

"Let's go back a bit," Frank observed. "Because we're some interested in this business, and want to get that stuff away from your friend."

"Friend!" scoffed Reddy. "If ever I'm free again, and I run across his tracks, he'll sure wish he'd never been born. Nawthin' ain't too tough for a fellow as'd betray his pals like he done; and after the idea of the raise was all mine, too."

"But tell 'em all they wanter know, Reddy," broke in Blaisdell, eagerly. "It's goin' to do me a heap of good if they kin lay hands on that slick jay, and snatch the stuff away from him."

"Well, ye see, we cached the stuff in the middle of a little opening," the disappointed one went on. "I 'member now how particular he was to have it jest so; but at the time me an' Blaisdell here never thought he'd give us the double cross like, and sneak back to get away with it all, which he did; the worse luck!"

"But you had horses, it seems," remarked Frank; "how does it come that you didn't start in pursuit at once, and overtake your false friend. With two hundred pounds added to the man's weight, no horse could hold out long. Do you mean to say you couldn't follows his trail?"

Reddy and his mate exchanged looks, and nodded ruefully.

"He didn't leave no trail, son," declared the former, with a shrug of his shoulders that stood for more than his words, perhaps.

"He must have, unless he flew away!" declared Frank.

"Which I take it is jest what our slick Jared Scott done, son!" remarked Reddy.

Bob uttered a cry. Up to that instant he had never dreamed to what the talk was leading.

But Frank made no outcry. In fact, he showed positive signs of having been entertaining a certain amount of suspicion regarding the truth. A number of little things in the immediate past, especially when they had caught some of the words passing between the two men just before the attack, may have given him a clue.

Nevertheless, he looked wonderfully pleased, as though this announcement concerning the identity of the third thief went far to brush aside some of the mystery.

"Jared Scott!" he repeated, after Reddy.

"Yes, that's the sneak who fooled us," replied the other, with bitterness in his voice.

"He had a balloon—did you know that?" demanded Frank.

"Naw he didn't—then. Found it, arter he give us the slip, and hurried back to where we cached the stuff. He told us he had a hoss hid somewhere near by, an' had rid in from Phoenix. That wasn't so. I knowed that Jared Scott had been helpin' one of these here fliers as gives exhibitions at fairs. Reckon as how he just run away with the old gasbag, an' had her hid in the hills awaitin' his chance to get away with our treasure."

"How did you find out that he had a balloon?" asked Frank.

"Why," explained Reddy, with a sickly grin; "after he piled the three sacks of gold aboard he had to drop off all his bags of ballast, and we seen 'em there in the open place. There was other evidences too, that made us mad. But what could we do? No use tryin' to chase a balloon, son. And by that time we reckoned that Mr. Riley'd be on the hunt. So we picks up our hosses, and runs. The rest ye knows."

It was all very plain to Frank now; and to Bob as well. The latter had not been able to say a word while this interesting conversation was going on between his chum and the leader of the gold thieves. But now that the story had all been told, Bob began to "get back to earth" again.

"Well, if that don't beat everything!" he exclaimed. "Just to think, Frank, we actually saved Jared Scott, when his balloon was running away from him, after something happened to make it unmanageable. But Frank, I looked in the broken basket, and there wasn't a single bag of ballast, or anything else there!"

"No," said Frank, with a broad smile beginning to cover his boyish face; "because Mr. Jared Scott had been compelled to heave the three bags of gold overboard, one at a time, perhaps, to try and lighten his falling air craft, which was

threatening to dump him out on the ground from loss of gas!"

"Frank, do you really believe that?" cried Bob.

"I certainly do," answered the other, who knew it could not be otherwise.

"He dropped the gold ballast to save his life; but, Frank, do pou think a man like Jared Scott would ever want to lose track of such a prize?" Bob went on.

"Make your mind easy on that score," broke in Reddy, who had been listening to this talk. "Jared always had an eye to the main chance; an' even if his life was hanging by a thread, he'd never throw a bag of the real stuff overboard, but what he'd mark the spot where it fell!"

Bob Archer's excitement grew stronger than ever. He caught hold of his chum by the arm, and Frank could see how the Kentucky boy was trembling.

"Frank, what about that packet he gave you?" he demanded.

"Oh! I've got it safe still; and here it is," replied the other, as he ran one hand inside his jacket, and produced the enevelope into which Jared Scott had slipped the paper on which he had written something, at the time he was leaving them to seek the service sof a doctor down the river.

"Frank, we saved his life, he said!" Bob continued.

"Perhaps we did; and again he might have got out of that pickle without any help from us. It was a toss-up," Frank replied, smiling at his chum's eagerness.

"But just then he was feeling mighty grateful to us, Frank. I saw how he started, and looked at you, when he heard your name. And I wouldn't be one bit surprised if what he wrote down on that paper turned out to be directions, telling us where to locate the three stolen bags of gold!"

"It may be you are right, Bob," Frank said, thoughtfully, as he looked at the packet in his hand; "but you remember I gave him my solemn promise that I wouldn't open this envelope until seven days had passed; and there's some time yet before then."

"Yes, *you* promised him," said Bob, "but *I* didn't say a word!"

With that he snatched the envelope from the hand of his chum, and tore the end off, as though he feared that Frank might try and stop him. But Frank evidently had no such intention just then. Perhaps he realized how conditions had arisen that changed the complexion of things very much. Jared Scott, an honest aeronaut, and Jarsed Scott, the accomplice of the gold thieves,

were two different persons. And a promise made under such deception might not hold.

Bob was eagerly reading what the man had written. To do this he had to bend down to the lantern. Frank, and all the others in the room, watched him intently, eager to know the import of the message.

When Bob finished the short contents of Jared Scott's mysterious note, he leaped up, and clutched Frank's hands.

"It's all right, Frank!" he exclaimed. "Just what I said, he wanted us to recover the treasure, because he feared he'd never get over his injuries. And he's set it all down here in black and white, just where he dropped each bag when almost touching the earth. We can't help but find 'em, Frank! Whoop! what luck! I feel like I could screech like a Navajo Indian in the war dance," and Bob did actually start to hop around the shack, as though unable to control himself.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW IT TURNED OUT—CONCLUSION

"LET me look at what he wrote, since you've chosen to break the seal," said Frank, holding out his hand, into which his chum placed the page torn from the memorandum book of Jared Scott.

The man had indeed carefully noted just where he dropped each sack, when compelled to lose them. One would be found at the foot of three cedars, that stood out by themselves in a certain place he described; a second in a little gully that crossed an open stretch of ground, where two trails came together; while the third, and last, had been tossed out on the summit of the range where the basket had collided with the rocks.

Frank saw that the directions were so clear that they would not have a great deal of trouble in locating the three bags. If they had burst by coming in contact with the ground their heavy contents would still lie in a heap, and could be easily gathered up.

"Why do you think he set the time at seven days, Frank?" asked Bob.

"Hum! well, now that's a question," remarked his chum. "If I knew Mr. Jared Scott better, I might be able to hit the truth, first shot. It may be he wanted more time to get away himself. Then again, perhaps he expected to know how he was going to come out with the doctor; and hoped for one last chance to get back here himself, to gather up his scattered sacks."

"That last guess sounds more like Jared," remarked Reddy, bitterly. "He wouldn't give up anything, if he saw any chance to keep a grip on it. But if it turned out that he had to 'cash in,' why then he might be willin' for ye to get the stuff back again."

"We're all pretty well played out just now," said Frank, after a pause.

"That's right," put in Bob.

"And nothing ought to be done till morning, when we can return to the mine with our prisoners. When we've got them off our hands, we'll turn our attention to the job of finding the treasure. How does that suit you, Bob and Mr. Riley?" went on Frank.

Both of them declared that they were fully satisfied.

"Only we've got to make sure that none of these slippery customers gives us the go-by during the balance of the night," added the ex-mine superintendent, scowling in the direction of Reddy,

Blaisdell and the two men whose names they did not as yet know.

"We'll hunt up some rope, and make them safe," Frank declared; and after an examination of the contents of the two bags, what they sought came to light in the shape of a heavy and strong line.

So the four men were compelled to submit to having their legs, as well as their arms, bound. And after Mr. Riley got through with them there was small chance for any one of them to escape.

After that the tired boys found the best place possible in which to lie down. Bob must have been asleep within three minutes after his head touched the bag he was using for a pillow; and he knew nothing more until some one shook him, calling out that it was morning.

"Why, I just slept like a log," declared Bob. "Never knew a thing all night. My! but I must have been pretty near all in, that time. How's everything, Frank?"

"Couldn't be finer; and a good morning to start back to the mine," remarked his chum, who had a fire started on the hearth, and some of the contents of the two bags cooking for breakfast.

"Say, we're lucky again, in finding all that grub, just when we were near the starvation stage," remarked Bob, as he sniffed the odor of coffee.

The four men were just where Bob had last seen them at the time he lay down. All declared themselves stiff and sore, particularly those who had been hurt in the excitement that had marked the previous night.

"I'm cooking plenty of breakfast for the crowd," Frank had announced aloud, as he saw the way in which the men would follow him around with their hungry eyes; "and one by one you fellows will be untied and fed; but after that your arms must be fastened again. We don't trust one of you any further than we can see you."

In good season they left the lone shack on the hillside, and headed down toward the spot where the two saddle boys, as well as Mr. Riley, expected to find their horses browsing.

Reddy had told where the pair they had ridden could be found. The men were fastened to the backs of these animals, which were to be led, as the little caravan took up the journey for distant Cherry Blossom mine.

"How long did it take us to get here?" asked Bob, after they had fairly started, Domino, Buckskin and the bay having been found readily enough below.

"More than three hours in all; but we're going to be twice that getting back," replied Mr. Riley.

"Why is that so?" asked Bob.

"Because, you see we don't expect to try and make speed, as we did coming."

"Well, we couldn't, with these fellows tied up the way they are. A walk, or at best, a slow trot, is the limit with them," and Frank pointed to the prisoners who sat grimly, two upon each spare horse.

"And then again, not wantin' to try and pass on that narrow ledge, I've got to lead around another way, that's longer, but safer. Perhaps we might make the mine a short time after noon, if all goes well," concluded Mr. Riley.

On the way they happened to pass close to one of the points referred to in the brief note of instructions left in their charge by Jared Scott. Frank, desirous of proving the truth of the directions which had been placed in his hand by the balloonist, took occasion to make a thorough search.

And sure enough, he came upon the sack at the foot of the three cedars. It had burst under the heavy impact with the ground; but it was a comparatively easy matter to gather up the precious contents, so that there was practically no loss whatever.

"This looks as if we were going to get it all back!" remarked Mr. Riley, stopping to notice the look of yearning that appeared on the faces

of the prisoners, as they feasted their eyes on the treasure sack.

It did take them fully six hours to reach the mine, and all of them were glad when the journey came at last to an end, particularly the bound men.

Everything was found to be moving finely at the Cherry Blossom. Sandy McCoy knew just how to manage things; for the fact of his having been an engineer aboard ship was in his favor when handling machinery.

Of course things had to be closed down for a short season after their arrival. The men were wild with excitement, for in some way the story of the robbery had leaked out. And when it was known that not only had two of the thieves been captured, but there was a very good chance for recovering all of the gold, hearty cheers announced that the late unpleasantness was already forgotten, and that from henceforth they were all in full sympathy with the company working the Cherry Blossom mine.

Of course the boys believed that the series of strange things that had come to pass since they left Circle Ranch, to make the long journey to the mine, were never to be equalled in all their experience. But when deciding thus they could not foresee certain events that were destined soon to come about. These will be related in the next

volume of this series, to be called: "The Saddle Boys at Circle Ranch; or, In at the Grand Round-Up."

Before returning to his ranch home, Frank spent three days in company with his chum, Mr. Riley, and Sim Garrison, searching for the other two missing treasure sacks. It proved that Jared Scott had very carefully noted where they had dropped. And, following out the plain directions which he had jotted down, they eventually found them both.

Thus the strike was settled; the treasure, stolen from the strong room, recovered; and all those who participated in the robbery caught, with the exception of Jared Scott.

Some time afterwards Frank tried to find him, but learned he had, with some friends, hurried away from the town on the river a few days after arriving there, regardless of his broken limb. Whether he really went up into the mountains in the hope of locating the treasure himself, regretting his act of giving its hiding place away, or simply vanished because he feared arrest, was never known.

Reddy and Blaisdell were tried for the crime, and received their sentence. Taking off time for possible good behavior they would have to serve some ten years.

The other two men managed to escape. They

had not been in the league to begin with, nor had either of them touched the real treasure sacks at any time; though their intentions could not be doubted.

When the time came for the saddle boys to make the return journey Mr. Riley accompanied them. And he promised that if their story of what had happened during their absence from the ranch failed in covering the ground, he would have a few things to add to it, such as the Colonel would be glad to hear.

Bob had made sure to secure the skin of the panther which had fallen to his gun on that occasion when the big cat attacked him for shooting the deer he had apparently selected for his own dinner.

"I don't care particularly about running across another of the same sort in a hurry," he remarked, after he found that the skin was in good condition, the dry air having acted as a preservative; "and it seems to strike me this will make a pretty good mat."

Nothing came to pass on the home trip that was out of the ordinary.

"Which shows how things will sometimes crowd a fellow," remarked Frank, as his chum was running off the list of adventures that had come to them, and using about all his fingers to keep tally.

Colonel Haywood was very much pleased with the way in which the two lads had conducted matters. He often declared that had he been able to make the trip himself he could not have done better, and possibly might have fallen short of the success that had followed their efforts.

Mr. Riley was installed in his new job, and soon declared he was glad the change had come about. The life of the range suited him better than that of the mine.

One day a gentleman came to Circle Ranch and asked to see Frank. It turned out that he was a Professor Wadleigh, the real owner of the balloon that Jared Scott had stolen when he conceived the idea of hoodwinking his two fellow schemers, who were planning to rob the Cherry Blossom mine.

The professor had learned in some way that Frank knew about his lost balloon, and hence had come to see if there was any chance for recovering it, as the silk of which it was made was valuable.

Of course Frank gave him minute directions as to where the balloon had lain at last accounts; and the professor went off with the intention of hiring several guides, and making the attempt at recovering his property.

Whether he succeeded or not Frank never knew. But often he and Bob would recall the exciting happenings that marked their journey to

the mine; and among these one that must always stand out with particular vividness was the occasion when they saw Jared Scott hanging from the wrecked balloon; and Frank snubbed the flight of the runaway gasbag by whipping the anchor rope around a tree trunk.

THE END

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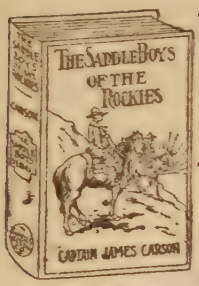

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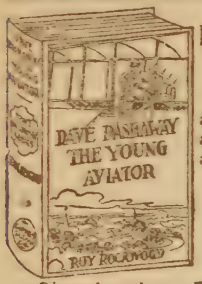

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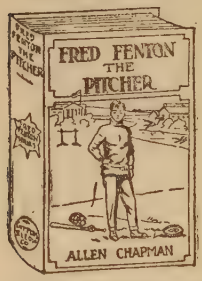

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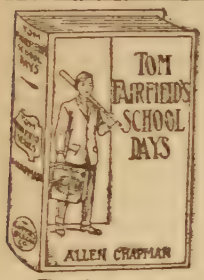

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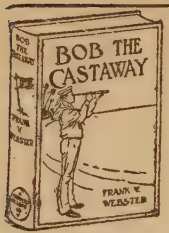

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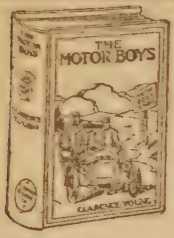

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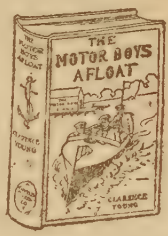

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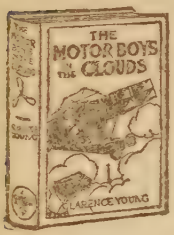

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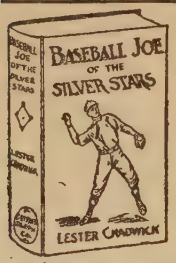

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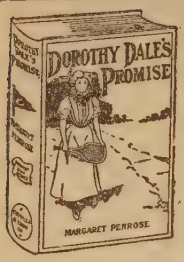

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